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PHILIP LARKIN'S "LOST WORLD"

James Naremore

Taken as a whole, Philip Larkin's poetry has the effect of a sustained attack upon the philosophical idealism of romantic literature, and more specifically upon its "decadent" stepchild, modernism. For virtually his entire career he has been writing at least implicitly on this subject, sometimes openly attacking modernism in poetry and jazz music, presenting himself as a skeptical, "less deceived" observer of contemporary life. In thirty years, only the surface mannerisms of his work have changed significantly, and then only once. In 1945, just after he graduated from Oxford, he published The North Ship, a volume of poetry which was superficially written in a bardic style he would later reject completely. He tells us that his "kindest and almost

1 Larkin has explained his attitudes in remarks to Ian Hamilton: he resents the "critical industry which is connected with culture in the abstract," a problem he lays at the door of Eliot and Pound: "to me the whole of the ancient world, the whole of classical and biblical mythology means very little..." (quoted by John Press, A Map of Modern English Verse [New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1969], p. 259). His remarks about modern jazz also deserve quoting: "as long as it was only Parker I didn't like, I might believe that my ears had shut up about the age of 25 and that jazz had left me behind. My dislike of Pound and Picasso, both of whom pre-date me by a considerable margin, can't be explained in this way. The same can be said of Henry Moore and James Joyce (a textbook case of declension from talent to absurdity). No, I dislike such things not because they are new, but because they are irresponsible exploitations of technique in contradiction of human life as we know it" (All What Jazz [New York: St. Martin's Press, 1970], pp. 16–17).

I would like to thank Patrick Parrinder of Cambridge University and Scott Sanders of Indiana, whose knowledge helped in the preparation of this essay.

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only critic” from those days was Vernon Watkins, who had given an “impassioned and imperative” reading of Yeats at the Oxford English Club in 1943.\(^2\) Larkin was greatly impressed with Watkins’ performance, and for the next three years he tried to imitate what he had heard; every night after supper, before he commenced writing, he would browse through the 1933 MacMillan edition of Yeats’s early poems. Thus he produced verses like “The Dancer”:

And if she were to admit
The world weaved by her feet
Is leafless, is incomplete?
And if she abandoned it,

Set loose the audience?
Then would the moon go raving,
the moon, the anchorless
Moon go swerving
Down at the earth for a catastrophic kiss. \((NS, p. 27)\)

Notice the rhetorical questions and the closing lines reminiscent of “The Man Who Dreamed of Faeryland.” Notice also, however, that the poem questions the aestheticism and idealism of Yeats’s work, and as a result the language seems partly at odds with the content. Clearly, the beauty of Yeats’s music, its “impassioned” quality, was influencing the young Larkin almost in spite of himself. Indeed *The North Ship* is so immersed in this romantic style that it might be mistaken for a latter-day version of *fin de siècle* Nature poetry. The prevailing tone is sorrowful, and the snowbound, north-of-England landscape is usually made to seem wild and splendid. When a lover in one of the poems hears the words “We must not meet again” from his beloved, he murmurs, “There was no lambing-night, / No gale-driven bird / No frost-encircled root / As cold as my heart” \((NS, p. 22)\).

Larkin explains that his subsequent reaction against “Celtic fever” was “undramatic, complete, and permanent” \((NS, p. 10)\), and his account of how he found a new manner has become a familiar item of current literary history. Sometime during 1946 he read Thomas Hardy’s poetry, was especially struck by “Thoughts of Phena at News of Her Death,” and began writing with a wry, detached voice, skeptical almost to the point of misanthropy, which made him one of the most important literary figures in postwar England. Everywhere he was

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exhibited as what a recent anthologist has called the "voice of a whole generation."

But Larkin did not reject his past so radically or so comfortably as he sometimes implies. The traditional view of his development has him casting aside romanticism in favor of an empirical, Movement poetic; thus the British critic Colin Falck has described the progress of his poetry since The North Ship as a repudiation of an "impossible idealism" and an "ever-deepening acceptance of the ordinariness of things as they are." This view needs qualification to the extent that Larkin was probably never a romantic in the technical, philosophical sense; he says that even when he was writing The North Ship he did not like Yeats's personality and did not understand Yeats's ideas but was only drawn to a "particularly potent music, pervasive as garlic" (NS, p. 9). From the beginning, Larkin's work has manifested a certain coolness and lack of self-esteem, a need to withdraw from experience; but at the same time it has continued to show his desire for a purely secular type of romance, a romance he must have felt in Vernon Watkins' "impassioned and imperative" readings, even if he could enjoy it only at second hand.

The conflicting strains in Larkin's personality are perhaps most evident in two poems he wrote during 1946, the year he read Hardy. One of these has been added as a coda to the 1966 edition of The North Ship, to announce the change that had come over his style. The other does not appear in any of the published volumes of Larkin's work. It is called "Sad Steps," and I quote it here:

Groping back to bed after a piss  
I part thick curtains, and am startled by  
The rapid clouds, the moon's cleanliness.  
........................................

High and preposterous and separate—  
Lozenge of love! Medallion of art!  
........................................

... a reminder of the strength and pain  
Of being young; that it can't come again,  
But is for others undiminished somewhere.  

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The New Statesman, 75 (1946), 876.
The moon in this poem is just as beautiful as it was in "The Dancer," but if the speaker of the earlier poem was suspicious of that beauty, the speaker here is defensively cynical. The moon, which was previously described as "anchorless," is now a "Lozenge of love," a "Medallion of art." In other words, Larkin implies that the superficial romanticism of his earlier verses was part of the "strength and pain" of being young—a feeling that won't come again, however much he half-consciously longs for it.

Actually, most of the poems in *The North Ship* are as forlorn in mood as this one; what is really new is the diction. There is no word like "piss" in *The North Ship*, although even here one has the sense that the new language, far from being liberating, is just another sign of sadness and disillusion. It is as if Larkin cannot come to terms with a life that contains both the moon and what Crazy Jane would call "the place of excrement." Thus the first stanza of this poem is an attempt to arrive at an effect which Larkin will come back to again and again in his later verses, where a certain wistfulness is generated out of the disparity between two kinds of language. On the one hand we have the tough talk of "Groping to bed after a piss," and on the other, a line that might have come from his earlier work: "The rapid clouds, the moon's cleanliness."

The poem Larkin added to *The North Ship* works according to the same principle, though in a somewhat subtler fashion. The first stanza makes a particularly vivid contrast with the other poems in the volume, and it is often quoted in critical discussions of his work:

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Waiting for breakfast, while she brushed her hair,
I looked down at the empty hotel yard
Once meant for coaches. Cobblestones were wet,
But sent no light back to the loaded sky,
Sunk as it was with mist down to the roofs.
Drainpipes and fire-escape climbed up
Past rooms still burning their electric light:
I thought: Featureless morning, featureless night. (NS, p. 48)
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Here, unmistakably, is Larkin's special voice. He has a resigned, though somewhat bitter, tone and an extremely clear way of speaking that sometimes looks deceptively like prose. Yet notice that the stanza is saved from utter deadness by the cunning balance it strikes between emotion and the lack of emotion: we have the empty hotel yard, the drainpipes and fire escape, the harshness of the last line; but we also have the woman brushing her hair, the cobblestones, the mist. Con-
sider how deprived the stanza would be without the second sentence, which is sadly beautiful, far less prosaic than the rest: "Cobblestones were wet, / But sent no light back to the loaded sky, / Sunk as it was with mist down to the roofs.” The morning is not quite so “featureless” as the speaker claims; in fact, it is painful to contemplate because an air of lost romance still hovers about the scene.

Clearly this poem is not a simple rejection of romantic illusions. In the next two stanzas, the speaker defines his problem, describing his initial attitude as a “misjudgment.” As he glances out the window at the mist-shrouded stones, he experiences a sort of epiphany:

The colorless vial of day painlessly spilled
My world back after a year, my lost lost world
Like a cropping deer strayed near my path again,
Bewareing the mind’s least clutch. 

But, tender visiting,
Fallow as a deer or an unforced field,
How would you have me? Towards your grace
My promises meet and lock and race like rivers,
But only when you choose. Are you jealous of her? (NS, p. 48)

The “tender visiting” is a sort of gift, a momentary ability to overcome disenchantment or coldness. Significantly, this visiting is described with the nature imagery which is so much a part of Larkin’s earlier, ostensibly romantic poems; it is brought on by the mist, which wanders “absolvingly past all it touched,” and it is compared to “a cropping deer strayed near my path again.” Far from wanting to reject this feeling, the speaker seeks to embrace it: “Towards your grace / My promises meet and lock and race like rivers.” Yet he knows that the passion will not stay, since it is quite beyond his control and comes only when it chooses. It may be “jealous” of the woman, so that it will only come when she has been removed to a safe distance, like the young lady in Larkin’s well-known poem on the photograph album. Consequently, the speaker predicts a return of his former emptiness, resulting in a loss of romance and a punishing self-contempt.

By concluding the latest edition of The North Ship with this poem, Larkin did more than demonstrate the change in his style. Whether he intended it or not, he made the “tender visiting” suggest a longing for the “impassioned” quality he had presumably rejected—“My world back after a year, my lost lost world.” And though he is

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pessimistic about his ability to achieve life's romantic possibilities, he hardly seems reconciled to his loss. Moreover, it should be emphasized that the pessimism expressed in this poem is not the exclusive property of Larkin's later work. For while *The North Ship* represents a striving after romance, it also reveals moments of emotional impotence, periodic frustrations of desire. Poem nine, for example, shows the speaker climbing a hill on a windy day, when "The blood unfurled itself" and became "an instrument stringed / For all things to strike music as they please"; later, returned to the city at night, he finds only "an ancient sadness" and "The heart in its own endless silence kneeling" (NS, p. 21). In poem twenty, he watches a pretty girl playing in the snow but is able to feel "Nothing so wild, nothing so glad as she":

So I walk on. Perhaps what I desired
—That long and sickly hope, someday to be
As she is—gave a flicker and expired;
For the first time I'm content to see
What poor mortar and bricks
I have to build with, knowing that I can
Never in seventy years be more a man
Than now—a sack of meal upon two sticks. (NS, p. 32)

The last line shows the influence of Yeats, but the note of inadequacy and self-contempt is Larkin's own distinctive contribution. We find this note again and again in his later work, where he will typically picture himself as a passionless bystander who contemplates the unsatisfactoriness of his life.

There is evidence, however, that the "long and sickly hope" for romance did not so much expire as become repressed. It is almost as if Larkin's withdrawn, bachelor persona had grown out of the youthful protagonist of his excellent first novel, *Jill* (1944). John Kemp, the leading character in the novel, is a provincial boy who wins a scholarship to Oxford. The son of a retired policeman at Huddlesford, Kemp is homely and ill-at-ease in his new environment, and his sense of inadequacy is exacerbated by the worldly young man from London who shares his rooms. In order to impress his fellow undergraduate, Kemp makes up a story about a lovely younger sister; soon, however, the dream girl becomes more than a simple lie. More and more she occupies Kemp's imagination, until he finds himself writing about her, even vicariously experiencing her life by fabricating diaries she is supposed to have kept. Later a real girl appears who resembles the fictional creation; she is the embodiment of all Kemp's efforts to give color to his
drab existence, but he has to suffer from a distance while the Londoner sets about seducing her. I hasten to add that *Jill* is not a strictly autobiographical novel, and that Larkin treats John Kemp with a considerable irony. Nevertheless, Kemp’s loneliness, his painful adoration of an imaginary girl, his feelings of social and personal inferiority—all these characteristics seem to lead directly toward the older, aloof voice we find in the poems, a voice which is suspicious of emotion, plagued by feelings of inadequacy, and nearly always disenchanted. It is a voice in which, to use Larkin’s own words, “there sleeps / A sense of life lived according to love.”

Sometimes Larkin’s adult persona will turn scornfully back upon his more romantic instincts, regarding them as deceptive or immature. “In this way I spent youth,” he says at one point in *The Whitsun Weddings*, “Tracing the trite untransferable / Truss-advertisement, truth” (*WW*, p. 43). But these passages are usually a bit too glib; they suggest that a great deal of Larkin’s Movement cynicism is a mask for hurt feelings or a symptom of regret for a misspent life. In fact his poetry repeatedly manifests a painful desire for any leap of the spirit. Somehow like Yeats in “Among School Children,” he is beset by “self-born mockers of man’s enterprise,” the artifacts and images people create to signify the unattainable world of their desires. For Larkin these images are often sexual, and they are especially sad for him to contemplate because they are a little vulgar. For example his eye falls upon the lingerie section of a working-class department store, where “Baby-Dolls and Shorties / Flounce in clusters,” representing the “young unreal wishes” of a “weekday world” (*WW*, p. 30). Or he describes a voluptuous, bathing-suited girl on a travel poster: vandals draw snaggled teeth, nipples, and a “fissured crotch” on the girl’s picture, setting her “fairly astride / a tuberous cock and balls,” leaving the poet to observe, “She was too good for this life” (*WW*, p. 35).

Clearly Larkin remains all too aware of “that much-mentioned brilliance, love, / . . . promising to solve, and satisfy, / And set unchangeably in order” (*WW*, p. 12); therefore his poems are nearly always tinged with a wistful pathos. Obviously there is a danger in this agonizing over “how separate and unearthly love is,” an agonizing which often results in paralysis or misanthropy. But in some of Larkin’s best poems the isolated, voyeuristic persona is moved, almost in

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spite of himself, to speak in more hopeful terms. As in the poem appended to the latest edition of *The North Ship*, a “lost world” returns, absolving the speaker of emptiness or resignation. At such moments Larkin is able to recover vestiges of beauty beneath the grey surfaces of his suburban life, and he creates a poetry of sentiment, an emotional sort of literature which is very different from the skeptical, neutral tones of Movement verse.

The chief examples of these momentary absolutions are Larkin’s two most successful longer poems, “Church Going” from *The Less Deceived* and the title piece from *The Whitsun Weddings*. In both cases the speaker’s initial detachment and irony give way, and though he remains essentially outside the life he observes, he responds with a deep emotional sympathy to the values he finds there. Of the two poems, “Church Going” is easily the most famous, perhaps because it illustrates so perfectly all the conservative, empirical attitudes that Robert Conquest polemicized in the first *New Lines* anthology: a traditional versification, an implicit suspicion of rhetoric and high emotion, and a refusal to treat religious experiences in anything but secular terms. Yet in spite of all these rather “anti-poetic” qualities, “Church Going” is extremely moving. Larkin’s true subject is not religion but “marriage, and birth, / And death, and thoughts of these,”7 the elemental rituals which the church symbolizes and to which the poem pays a quiet tribute. The presumably “bored, uninformed” speaker, a lonely cyclist who stops to wander through an empty church, is forever “surprising / A hunger in himself to be more serious,” and his mood changes from a sort of nervous irony to an undisguised respect for the church’s decaying presence.

“Church Going” reflects this change of attitude in the effortless, expert way that it moves between two quite different levels of diction. At one extreme is an idiomatic, Movement style, verging on fake toughness, and at the other is a simple but grand language that almost belongs in the pulpit. The idiomatic talk is shown most clearly in the first stanza, where the speaker, having made sure that nobody is around, steps into the church. He finds “sprawlings of flowers,” “some brass and stuff / Up at the holy end,” and a “tense, musty, unignorable silence, / Brewed God knows how long.” In some of Larkin’s contemporaries, lesser poets like Kingsley Amis, the verse will seldom rise above this safe, adolescent stage; but Larkin gives the prosaic language

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7 “Church Going,” *The Less Deceived* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1960), p. 29. Parenthetical page references to this edition will be preceded by *LD*. 

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a valid dramatic context, suggesting an awkwardness and discomfort behind the speaker’s joking. The wry, sacrilegious tone of the early stanzas is clearly a defense rising out of a fear of sentiment. Indeed the speaker himself is conscious of this defensiveness and directs as much irony toward his own behavior as toward the church. When he reads a few “Hectoring large-scale verses” from the Bible, pronouncing them “much more loudly than I’d meant,” the echoes “snigger briefly” in return.

Finally, just at the point where he has begun to note that the church was “not worth stopping for,” his attitude takes a different turn. As in the poem I have quoted from The North Ship, where Larkin has second thoughts about a “featureless morning,” our first impressions are thrown into doubt and the language gradually becomes more contemplative, lofty. The speaker does not entirely abandon his previous mood, and occasionally he returns to a purely colloquial diction. In general, however, the poem moves toward expansive, “poetic” feelings, and the end has a very different style from the beginning:

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,
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 first three lines of this final stanza, with their slightly Latinate diction and their touches of old-fashioned nobility, are nearly as obsolescent in character as the church itself. But Larkin has been able to rescue the power of such language by holding it at bay as long as possible with the skeptical joking and the flat, plain diction of the earlier stanzas. Ultimately he shows us that there is a value in the ritual of “marriage, and birth, / And death” which “never can be obsolete,” and the strong emotion at the end of the poem is all the more effective because it seems to have broken through the innate defensiveness.

The same process is at work in “The Whitsun Weddings,” the key poem in Larkin’s third collection of verse. Here the subject is marriage, though the cycle of birth and death is also suggested. The poem gives an account of a Whit-Saturday train journey to London, and it draws heavily on an industrialized landscape which “Church Going” de-
scribed merely as “suburb scrub.” The plain, almost lifeless scenery acts as a correlative for the speaker's general lack of emotion, but at the end of the poem he forsakes his detached, ironic attitude and is deeply moved by what he calls a “Travelling coincidence” (WW, p. 23). Anthony Thwaite says that prior to the first BBC reading of “The Whitsun Weddings,” Larkin wrote asking him to try and get from the actor “a level, even a plodding descriptive note, until the mysterious last lines, when the poem should suddenly ‘lift off the ground.’” Actually, it seems to me that the first stanza, though very quiet in tone, gives a hint of the larger emotional development:

Not till about  
One-twenty on the sunlit Saturday  
Did my three-quarters-empty train pull out,  
All windows down, all cushions hot, all sense  
Of being in a hurry gone. We ran  
Behind the backs of houses, crossed a street  
Of blinding windscreens, smelt the fish-dock; thence  
The river’s level drifting breadth began,  
Where sky and Lincolnshire and water meet. (WW, p. 21)

Most of the stanza seems conversational; the language is plain, emotionally empty, except for the mildly depressing atmosphere evoked by Larkin's imagery: “my three-quarters-empty train,” “All windows down, all cushions hot,” “the backs of houses,” “a street / Of blinding windscreens,” “a fish-dock.” But as the train gathers speed and moves out of the town, a sudden view of English landscape, marked by the semicolon near the end of line eight, gives a beautiful feeling of release and freedom. The movement slows as the speaker's eye is caught by the wide vista before him, and the last two lines are lyrical, even majestic, though they seem to have grown quite naturally out of the flat tone of the preceding verses. The enclosed, arid heat of the opening has been replaced by a feeling of space and water.

It is worth pausing here to note Larkin's fondness for writing about the view from a train window. In “Like the Train’s Beat,” one of the best poems in The North Ship, he secretly observes a girl sitting in the corner seat of a train, where “the hammered miles / Diversify behind her face” (NS, p. 24). Jill opens with a wonderfully sad and beautiful account of a rail trip to Oxford, and the first poem in The

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Whitsun Weddings, entitled “Here,” is a rapid panorama of the north of England seen through the windows of a speeding passenger car. Perhaps it is only natural for an Englishman to be fascinated with train rides, but for Larkin the thoughtful moods and the somewhat hypnotic rhythms of such journeys are especially attractive; they give him the opportunity to observe life without participating in the scenes that go past. In “The Whitsun Weddings,” however, the effect is anything but neutral. The striking contrast between city and countryside works to suggest the gradual encroachment of technology upon nature, with a consequent deadening of life. All afternoon, as the train moves southward from the provinces toward London, we catch glimpses of a defaced landscape: “Wide farms went by, short-shadowed cattle, and / Canals with floating of industrial froth” (WW, p. 21). For a moment the “smell of grass” displaces “the reek of buttoned carriage-cloth,” but only until the next town, “new and nondescript,” approaches with “acres of dismantled cars.”

This same disfigurement is stressed in the speaker’s account of people on the rail platforms outside his window. At first he reads a book and pays no attention to the sound of Whitsun wedding parties at each station; gradually, however, his curiosity is aroused, and he begins to lean forward in order to study the crowds. He is first struck by the girls, “grinning and pomaded,” in “parodies of fashion.” His description of their costumes is remarkably similar to the language in a shorter poem I have mentioned, “The Large Cool Store,” where the speaker comments on a display of women’s sleepwear. In this case, the setting is a “long cool platform,” and daytime clothing serves to mark the girls off “unreally from the rest.” The permanent hairdos, the “nylon gloves and jewellery-substitutes, / The lemons, mauves, and olive-ochres” become extremely sad to think about; they represent what Larkin elsewhere calls a “shot at how things ought to be / long fallen wide” (WW, p. 17), and they are even more pathetic because, like the Modes for Night in the department store poem, they are “synthetic, natureless.”

As is nearly always the case in Larkin’s best work, some of this pain is kept at a distance by wit. When the train pulls away from one of the platforms, the speaker watches the bridesmaids and sisters left behind, all posed “irresolutely . . . / As if out on the end of an event / Waving goodby / To something that survived it.” The pathos is nicely blended with a sense of humor that never degenerates into mere scorn. But as the train hurries toward London, the poem becomes more serious. Landscape foretells the advent of an enormous city; fields turn into
building-plots, and "poplars cast / Long shadows over major roads.

. . ." Ultimately, when the train arrives, the only visible sign of nature is in the "walls of blackened moss" outside the terminal. Then, in its final stanzas, "The Whitsun Weddings" undergoes a radical change of tone, similar to the change we feel in the last line of the first stanza, equivalent to the change that comes over the speaker in "Church Going." It is difficult, if not impossible, to explain how Larkin's persona achieves a moment of exaltation—an epiphany—in spite of all his irony and detachment; but at the end he casts aside his reserve and envisions, beneath the painfully ordinary surfaces of life, a great beauty. Within the space of an hour, he says, "A dozen marriages got under way":

. . . and none
Thought of the others they would never meet
Or how their lives would all contain this hour.
I thought of London spread out in the sun,
Its postal districts packed like squares of wheat:

There we were aimed. . .

. . . and it was nearly done, this frail
Travelling coincidence; and what it held
Stood ready to be loosed with all the power
That being changed can give. We slowed again,
And as the tightened brakes took hold, there swelled
A sense of falling, like an arrow-shower
Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain. (WW, p. 23)

The speaker has been moved by the fundamental significance of marriage itself, in much the same way as the speaker in "Church Going" was moved by the significance of the church. In both poems Larkin discovers an elemental seriousness behind a shabby, fallen exterior, and his emotions tend to "lift off the ground." In "The Whitsun Weddings," however, the language of the closing lines is much less intellectualized and abstract. Notice that the world of nature, previously obscured or defaced by an industrial landscape, finds its way back into the poem through two crucial similes: the postal districts of London are "packed like squares of wheat," and the speaker has a "sense of falling . . . like an arrow-shower . . . somewhere becoming rain." The ending presents us with images of fertility, in contrast to the barrenness of nearly everything that has gone before, and if we look back we see that this final moment has been prepared for by the way
Larkin's persona becomes progressively engaged in the life he observes. He has moved from empty detachment to curiosity, to a sort of mocking interest, then ultimately to a celebration of the marriages. Though he remains an isolated figure, he opens himself to a "tender visiting" rather like the one that brought a moment of love to the speaker of an earlier poem. Like the married couples, he is "changed," if only for an instant.

"The past is past and the future neuter" Larkin has written, but "The Whitsun Weddings" and "Church Going" tend to qualify such a notion. They are small victories over the apparent ugliness and purposelessness of everyday life, moments when something important discloses itself beneath a mundane existence. I say "small victories" because I think there is some truth in Colin Falck's criticism of Larkin for destroying "the very bridge which romanticism would construct between the ideal and the world which actually exists."9 Obviously Larkin has to some extent cut himself off from the vitality he would like to feel, and his disillusionment sometimes leads to very pedestrian verses or to an extraordinary sense of futility, as in these powerfully bleak lines from "Dockery and Son":

Life is first boredom, then fear.  
Whether or not we use it, it goes,  
And leaves what something hidden from us chose,  
And age, and then only the end of age. (WW, p. 38)

At one extreme, this attitude leads to what M. L. Rosenthal has termed a "Heroic self-demeaning,"10 but at other times it creates a nasty atmosphere of failure and a defensive, nearly adolescent sense of humor. The unpleasant side of Larkin's wit can be seen in "If, My Darling," where the speaker grimly describes his true self. Were his "darling" to jump "like Alice, with floating skirt" into his head, she would find "infected circles," "Delusions that shrink to the size of a woman's glove / Then sicken inclusively outwards," "an adhesive sense of betrayal," and a "swill tub of finer feelings." The sight of all this, he remarks, "Might knock my darling off her unpriceable pivot" (LD, p. 42). Here an acute self-contempt is translated into contempt of "My Darling," whoever she is. It is difficult to admire the speaker even for his honesty; his confession is so irrational and masochistic that one doubts if he knows himself as well as he thinks.

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Larkin's problem is that in his apparent rejection of philosophical idealism he has become wary of all romance, including the passion and the sense of active rebellion which gives modernist literature much of its humanity. If the right-wing, visionary poetry of Yeats represents a flawed thesis, then Larkin's poetry, which has its own conservative instincts, represents a flawed antithesis. Colin Falck seems to be addressing this problem in his essay on Larkin, which concludes with a call for a poetry of "lucid barbarism"; my chief disagreement with Falck is that I resist having to choose such an unhappy alternative as he presents. Surely we can have the "passionate intensity" which is often missing in Larkin, but without the antihuman barbarism, obscurity, or escapism which is the repellent side of modernist literature.

In any case, poems such as "The Whitsun Weddings" show that Larkin is trying to assert his humanity, not deny it. They confirm Anthony Thwaite's observation about the "lesson" that Larkin has learned from Hardy: "a man's own life, its suddenly surfacing perceptions, its 'moments of vision', . . . could fit whole and without compromise into poems. There did not need to be any large-scale system of belief, any such circumambient framework as Yeats constructed within which to fashion his work." They also suggest that the greatest virtue in Larkin's poetry is not so much his suppression of large poetic gestures as his ability to recover an honest sense of joy and beauty. There are times when Larkin's skeptical, disillusioned self takes over entirely; he seldom presents himself as anything but an onlooker, and his collections are full of bitter poems about failure. He can make us feel the pain of an empty life, as in a poem like "Home is so Sad" (WW, p. 17), but such verses would not hurt so much if Larkin did not retain the desire for a "lost world," a yearning for the way things ought to be. Beneath his irony and his potential lack of feeling, there is a sympathy which now and then breaks through to create a powerful effect. Thus some of his best poems are purely secular epiphanies, "tender visitings"; his Movement style is thrown into relief by his occasional discoveries of strong feeling, and the moments of light, always highly qualified by the grey that surrounds them, become extremely valuable. Perhaps that is why, in the last lines of the last poem in The Whitsun Weddings, Larkin cautiously offers an "almost-instinct" which he has found "almost true": "What will survive of us is love."

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11 Falck, p. 110.
12 Thwaite, p. 43.