

## Larkin and His Audience

Readers of Philip Larkin's poetry keep writing about it, even though they recognize how simple and clear it is, because they also sense that its most distinctive aspect is indefinable, not just in criticism of the poetry but in the poetry itself. Because this aspect of Larkin's poetry seems by its very nature to be inexpressible, it needs speaking of in as many ways as possible, if the very sense of it is not to lapse. It seems that only the obvious can be said of Larkin, and that everyone who has written on him has said it again and again, in one way or another, since it is as simple and clear as a glass of water. Yet, because it cannot be defined, doubts remain as to whether either his most sympathetic critics, like John Wain, David Timms, and Alan Brownjohn, or his more severe, like Colin Falck, Donald Davie, and Calvin Bedient are responding to what makes Larkin's poetry of distinctive value.

Of Larkin himself, however, there can be no doubt. His choice of "Absences" as his own favorite poem for the anthology, *Poet's Choice*, as early as 1962, indicates that even then he had a sure sense of the indefinable aspect of his poetry that gives it its value. For "Absences" comes closer than any other of Larkin's poems to being explicit about what is inexplicable.

Rain patters on a sea that tilts and sighs.  
Fast-running floors, collapsing into hollows,  
Tower suddenly, spray-haired. Contrariwise,  
A wave drops like a wall: another follows,  
Wilting and scrambling, tirelessly at play  
Where there are no ships and no shallows.

Above the sea, the yet more shoreless day,  
Riddled by wind, trails lit-up galleries:  
They shift to giant ribbing, sift away.

Such attics cleared of me! Such absences!<sup>1</sup>

John Press uses "Absences," in a recent article, as an instance of those of Larkin's poems which "evoke a world transcending the contingencies and imperfection of daily existence," a world "whose nature can be hinted at by the medium of images drawn from the inexhaustible realm of nature—sun,

moon, water, sky, clouds, distance.”<sup>2</sup> Donald Davie’s unarguable claim that Larkin buys “sympathy with the human, at the price of alienation from the non-human” should insure that Press is not misheard as saying that “Absences” is a nature poem, a poem sympathetic with the nonhuman.<sup>3</sup> For Press says only that Larkin *uses* images from nature, and it is clear that the phrase, “the inexhaustible realm,” is the critic’s, not the poet’s. Press is, however, wrong to attribute a transcending world to the poet. Larkin himself is more precise. He says of the poem:

I fancy it sounds like a different, better poet than myself. The last line, for instance, sounds like a slightly unconvincing translation from a French symbolist.<sup>4</sup>

If “Absences” does evoke a transcendent world, it is only in the shape of an unconvincing translation. That is what Larkin likes about the poem. What remains, in the place of that disbelieved, denied world, is the indefinable aspect of his poetry to which I have been pointing. The poem is “cleared of me,” the biographically identifiable ego is absent from it. Yet it is no world, natural or supernatural. It is a very human attending and exclaiming; it is nothing, that unobjectifiable, un-delimitable act of observing, thinking, and speaking. The act itself cannot be seen or heard; in truth, it cannot even be thought, because to think it is to objectify it, to treat it as a mental object or fact, whereas its essential nature, as an act that arches over and assimilates both self and world, is to be irreducible to that which is other than itself, to the posited, to the factual. There is, however, nothing superhuman, Teutonic, or metaphysical about it, even though it is no part of the world as it is thought about in the *Tractatus*. By alliterating “absences” with “attics,” Larkin calls attention to its humanness, even its commonness. It is awesome only in the sense that it is invulnerable, but it is available to any and all who will simply pull back from the existent world and live the invisible, inaudible, inarticulable attending aspect of their humanity along with whatever else they may have to do and suffer in the real, existent human and nonhuman world. Larkin is very careful to help his audience hear the last line in just this, the proper way. The conspicuous alliteration in the last line of the first stanza insures that, as the absence of all human beings is being affirmed, their presence as the indefinable act of viewing the sea as free of all human beings is gently suggested. The sea is made to remind one of a funhouse, with its collapsing floors, its tiltings and drops, its playfulness. The indefinable aspect of the poem, the saving, indefinable aspect of humanity, to which even the vast images of the sea and the sky are inadequate, is safe and homey. It has nothing to do with the fearfulness of nihilism or existentialistic absurdity. It is that absolute secur-

ity into which the poem leads one to retreat from the meaninglessness of existence, of everything objective, whether ideal or real.

It is not otherworldly, only nonworldly. The “yet more shoreless day” does, of course, have its shores, as does everything in the objective world, whatever its expanse. Even the final exclamation, “Such absences!”, is pressed into a delimited shape by the verbal imagining of the undelimitable nothing who does not give himself up even to the poem as object, offering it as a self-consuming artifact, to be broken down along with all selves as entities, and assimilated into the perfect freedom of being invisibly pleased. In such freedom, there is no respect for persons, there is no hierarchic stratification, one and all are anonymous. The most authentic statement Larkin has made outside his poetry is: “I think it’s important not to feel crushed.”<sup>5</sup> That is the essence of the inexplicable freedom that gives his poems their distinctive value. However silly Larkin is willing to make himself seem within his poems, he is never crushed, because he has his true life in that undelimitable, uncrushable act of attending, of imagining, of speaking. His poems make an appeal, it is true, as though Larkin were an entertainer, who would as a result be subject to anxieties concerning the ups and downs of audience response. If the appeal fails, however, the loss is the reader’s, not Larkin’s, for he is never fully engaged in any objective situation or encounter, whereby he might be hurt or crushed. The same sort of aloofness indeed is what he offers to all, not as a way of life, but as an aspect of whatever way of life one may be connected with. It is easy of access, and priceless because invulnerable.

“Solar,” a poem in Larkin’s most recent volume, *High Windows*, is enough like “Absences” to indicate how steady his fidelity has been. It is quite clearly “a slightly unconvincing translation from a French symbolist.”

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 eye sees you  
Simplified by distance  
Into an origin:  
Your petalled head of flames  
Continuously exploding.  
Heat is the echo of your  
Gold.

Coined there among  
Lonely horizontals  
You exist openly.  
Our needs hourly  
Climb and return like angels.  
Unclosing like a hand,  
You give for ever.<sup>6</sup>

Actually, this poem is an unconvincing translation not of a French symbolist, but of the final poem in Thom Gunn's *Moly*, "Sunlight." Gunn works to be precise about the sun in its nonhuman remoteness and otherness, and yet he also strives to be precise about the exact nature of the sun as an image of our desires. The poem ends in a highly individual address to the sun taken doubly, as it is and as it "outlasts us at the heart."

Great seedbed, yellow centre of the flower,  
Flower on its own, without a root or stem,  
Giving all colour and all shape their power,  
Still recreating in defining them,

Enable us, altering like you, to enter  
Your passionless love, impartial but intense,  
And kindle in acceptance round your centre,  
Petals of light lost in your innocence.<sup>7</sup>

Although Gunn seems to be in accord with Alvarez's claim that "since Freud the late Romantic dichotomy between emotion and intelligence has become totally meaningless," he is emphasizing the stress between what one knows and what one desires.<sup>8</sup> It is the pain of holding the known and the desired up against each other that gives "Sunlight" its power. That power, moreover, is enhanced by the way Gunn's sunlight refracts light coming to him from "Burnt Norton IV" ("After the kingfisher's wing/ Has answered light to light, and is silent, the light is still/ At the still point of the turning world") as well as from the last canto of the *Paradiso*. Gunn's "Sunlight" disproves Donald Davie's claim that, along with its violation of the non-human, mass industrialization and suburbanization has so damaged the traditional language of celebration that images like water and wheat have lost their poetic potency.<sup>9</sup>

For Larkin, on the contrary, no object, not even the sun, deserves such adoration. He accepts the debasement of all objects and images and uses even the supreme object, the sun, in such a way as to reduce it to mere words in the service of his special kind of human freedom. That freedom

entails a recognition that one cannot rely on anything outside himself as an origin, as a source of value, and that, if one separates himself off from his needs and from those aspects of himself which are visible, which "exist openly," he himself can be that which no object, real or ideal, can be, inviolably self-originate. To accomplish this, one must split himself as intelligence off from his needs and emotions. Larkin is willing to do it in order to be uncrushable. When he snaps out "Sod all" or "Books are a load of crap," when he reduces "essential beauty" to a picture slapped up on a billboard, he is not just being mean and nasty, but is insisting that all objects are ultimately unconvincing.

In "Solar," instead of a beholding of the sun with adoration, Larkin offers the hilarious shenanigans of a verbal artist whipping the silly sun about with metaphorical abandon, shaking it like a baby toy. The word "Solar" itself makes the sun small, shrunken by commerce and science. It is just something hung up there, suspended in a room with no furniture, a naked bulb, but magical, without wires. It may be a "lion face," but it is a comic one, spilling like a sack of wheat, pouring like a salt shaker. "Continuously exploding" set against "petalled head of flames" is all show, fireworks. The sun's gold is coined, it is just legal tender, solar coinage. The sun, at bottom, is like a picture on a billboard, an illuminated hand unclosing over and over, to which we send our needs and receive them back, unchanged. In its dismissiveness, its mildly sad contempt, the poem is jovial. There is hidden laughter at the loss of one more source of security, for there is such security in one's own self-source. Larkin feels that modernist jazz must be all wrong, because it comes across so clearly as not "the music of happy men."<sup>10</sup> If Larkin's poetry is at times tedious and irritating, it is not because of its chronic sadness, but because of what lies behind it, making it a sham sadness, that is, its gaiety, its jollity, won without effort and held to so jauntily.

In the introduction to the 1966 reprint of his pre-poetic volume of verse, *The North Ship*, Larkin says he woke up poetically when he realized that Hardy's "Thoughts of Phena At News of Her Death" was not a gloomy poem.<sup>11</sup> He also admits that, because the volume of Yeats which so influenced *The North Ship* stopped at "Words for Music Perhaps," he "never absorbed the harsher last poems." If Larkin did, in his maturity, overcome Yeats's influence and write under Hardy's, just as important is the fact that the gaiety which charges Larkin, as it nowhere charges Hardy, resembles that of late harsh poems of Yeats like "Lapus Lazuli," which ends:

There, on the mountain and the sky,  
On all the tragic scene they stare.  
One asks for mournful melodies;  
Accomplished fingers begin to play.

Their eyes mid many wrinkles, their eyes,  
Their ancient, glittering eyes, are gay.<sup>12</sup>

Yeats says it and aspires to it; Larkin does it. There is nothing heroic in Larkin, because it requires no effort. The heroic aspect of "Lapus Lazuli" comes from Yeats's feeling that that gaiety is out of his reach, that he is still tied to the natural, dying animal.

It bears repeating, I think, to say that Larkin does not write symbolic poems, only unconvincing translations of them. There are no objective correlatives in his poetry. The sun of "Solar" is shown up as deserving dismissal, as incapable of bodying forth indefinable value. Just so, the sea and "shoreless day" of "Absences," instead of symbolizing mental spaciousness, are made to seem amusingly confined and inadequate, in comparison to the illimitable act of seeing them so. Many of Larkin's poems elude the crushing condescension of unsatisfied critics by crushingly dismissing each and every symbol as inadequate. Alvarez, who quite regularly has the courage to appear in vulnerable ways, called the last poem of *The Less Deceived*, "At Grass," (which Larkin considers his first good poem), "a nostalgic re-creation of the Platonic (or *New Yorker*) idea of the English scene, part pastoral, part sporting. His horses are *social* creatures of fashionable race meetings and high style."<sup>13</sup> Alvarez's dismissive tone echoes crudely the delicately dismissive tone of Larkin himself, in the very poem Alvarez is dismissing, "At Grass." It is true that the two horses of the poem are better off at grass than when winning races. At grass they have a freedom not unlike that which is the joy of Larkin's poetry. They stand anonymous, they

Have slipped their names, and stand at ease,  
Or gallop for what must be joy,  
And not a fieldglass sees them home,  
Or curious stop-watch prophesies:  
Only the groom, and the groom's boy  
With bridles in the evening come.<sup>14</sup>

Alvarez moves away from the poem uncomprehendingly as a result of placing it next to Hughes's "A Dream of Horses." If it is placed next to "A Blessing" by James Wright, the exquisite edge of "At Grass" will become available, if still invisible. Wright and a friend enter a field where two Indian ponies "come gladly out of the willows" to welcome them. There is a genuine encounter, where the nonhuman and the human momentarily fuse in a joy so delicate that it cannot quite bear the triumph of the poem's ending:

Suddenly I realize  
That if I stepped out of my body I would break  
Into blossom.<sup>15</sup>

In "At Grass," Larkin does not approach the horses, but keeps his distance, the eye just barely picking "them out/ From the cold shade they shelter in." If the horses were being offered as representative of a perfect human joy, if a fusion of the human and nonhuman did occur, then the edge of that moment would turn ironically against the poet, who as author of this poem is not slipping his name but making it, winning the poetry race in England. Larkin, however, is aware that by putting these horses into his poem, he is halting their escape into perfect invisibility and anonymity, their "going down the long slide/ To happiness, endlessly." He is holding them up, a catch, still alive, but corralled within the fence of the poem. Their joy, their freedom, is entirely dependent on the groom and the groom's boy, who "With bridles in the evening come." Even if the reader is merely puzzled by the last two lines, that will be enough to pull him away from the horses, and the poem itself, as objectified, into that condition of aloneness which is identical with oblivion, an identification almost made explicit in the curious little poem, "Wants," also printed in *The Less Deceived*. What often seem like endings that qualify the rest of the poem, the poet turning on himself and getting the whole truth out so that the poem is perfect, are really working in the opposite way, like trick endings which will insure that the reader not take the poem, or the existence within "the garden" of the poem, too seriously. Imagine a dismissive wave of the hand fading out of sight, and you can sense a generosity in Larkin not matched by Marvell, even if their wit is comparable. Larkin wants to be sure that no reader takes his images too seriously. Highly-wrought language, a dazzle which might draw a reader swooning and yet alert into the imaginative experience of a poem, as a refuge where he could live happily apart from the pressures of the daily grind, Larkin will never imperil a reader with such a gawdy trap. What Larkin would share with his reader, ultimately, is the act of dismissing all images, all symbols, all realizations, all artifacts, the world itself, as inadequate, as inferior to the freedom of looking, imagining, thinking dismissively.

## II

What makes not just Larkin's poems, but also his ataraxic stance, his sustained act of looking, imagining and thinking dismissively, so unstable is that there is only one form of response appropriate to them. Larkin has said that, of "the two tensions from which art springs . . . the tension between

the artist and his material, and between the artist and his audience . . . the second of these has slackened or even perished," during the past seventy-five years or so, in the works of those artists and poets known as modernists.<sup>16</sup> Although some poets do unquestionably write poems with no sense of how they will be heard, I should have thought that this was characteristic, not of modernist poets, but of romantic or neo-romantic poets. Modernist poets, in contrast, are, if anything, excessively concerned with their audience. They sense an extreme diversification of the ways in which poetry and art are being responded to, not just hostile ways along with sympathetic ones, but, even more challenging, ways which come out of radically different life conceptions. In both *The Wasteland* and *Mercian Hymns*, the difficulty of the poetry results from its being responsive to conflicting modes of reading, to what, in the visual-auditory experience of poetry, is like a multiple perspectivism in the visual arts. Much of the genius of Eliot and Hill goes into their shaping the poetry so precisely that the unique way in which each hears his words is realized in sharp and often opposing relation to alternate ways in which those words can be heard. As a result, much of the delight of modernist poetry comes from hearing it in several ways at once, in the poet's own unique way, in the ways from which he has differentiated his own, and in one's own way. The poetry is made to allow for, even to encourage and thrive on, multiple modes of hearing and responding. Such charged vitality—in contrast to the relaxed vitality Larkin admires—is not quite the same as Empsonian ambiguity, Wheelwright's polysignificance, or even Umberto Eco's notion of the open work, for it emphasizes the poet's own unique mode of listening as the creative edge of the poem that evokes and keeps alive all the alternate and opposed ways of listening. In modernist poetry the reader feels responsible for listening as the poet listens, but this requires that he also listen in ways the poet sets himself against, and, ultimately, also in his own way.

The strain of creating such polyphonic poetry must lead even the strongest of modernist poets to the verge of disintegration and breakdown. For weaker aspirants it has no doubt led to what Larkin erroneously describes as typically modernist products, "poems resembling the kind of pictures typists make with their machines during the coffee break, or a novel in gibberish, or a play in which the characters sit in dustbins."<sup>17</sup> Collapsing great modernist works, as Larkin does here, with weak evasions from the strain of the modernist predicament into a single junkheap seems, however, to be itself a perilously evasive move. It is, however, consistent with the poetry Larkin writes, a poetry for a single audience, which listens in a single way determined by Larkin as his way. Claiming falsely that all modernist poetry is like so much, say, of Robert Creeley's, not heard at all, Larkin feels even righteous about writing a poetry which is preeminently



hearable, in a single, soporific way, indifferent to all other ways, especially thoughtful, reflective, critical ways. The aim is pleasure in the form of ease and comfort. One is invited to set aside his larger, human self in its relations with others and with the complexities of his actual situation and to assume the dream-identity of a single, secure audience, a fictitious cloud of unknowing that takes on real existence only as that into which actual readers and listeners escape. Collingwood was warning forty years ago that entertainment could become so important a part of a person's day that he would cease to live at all except in a make-believe way.

There is, in sum, a weakness in the generosity with which Larkin offers poems that will not disturb his readers. The unstableness of his achievement, moreover, stems from its dependence on his readers' being generous in the same way. The poem "Wants" suggests that Larkin is aware of the instability of the conditions of his poetry:

Beyond all this, the wish to be alone:  
However the sky grows dark with invitation-cards  
However we follow the printed directions of sex  
However the family is photographed under the flagstaff—  
Beyond all this, the wish to be alone.

Beneath it all, desire of oblivion runs:  
Despite the artful tensions of the calendar,  
The life insurance, the tabled fertility rites,  
The costly aversion of the eyes from death—  
Beneath it all, desire of oblivion runs.<sup>18</sup>

The latent appeal of the poem is that one accept the not quite stated identification of being alone and being in oblivion without reflecting on it or criticizing it. The condition of oblivious aloneness is, to be sure, a delicate one, is, indeed, an aspect of that aloof, dismissive attentiveness which is the inner value of all Larkin's poetry. To be alone but aware of being alone is the painful state of loneliness. In truth, one is not really alone, since he has doubled up into an inner society of being alone and being aware of it. The real aloneness which one desires is an oblivious aloneness, a condition in which others are unaware of one and one is himself unaware of himself as well as of others. The self, moreover, of which one would be unaware is not just the self as one entity among many in the objective world, but also that unidentifiable, unobjectifiable, larger self which is the sustained act of looking at everything dismissively. In the condition of oblivious aloneness, that is, one is dismissive even of one's quintessential dismissiveness.

One is not, of course, to think about this condition, only to experience it,

and Larkin, writing from within this condition as from an impregnable fortress, lures the reader who wants what he has with a strikingly subtle technique. At bottom, the technique is the casual lightness of the assertorial tone of the middle three lines of both stanzas. The alternatives to oblivious aloneness are presented not as irritants that make one want to escape into that state and not as attractions in spite of which one wants to make that escape, but as items waved aside and dismissed as negligible. As a result, unless one has read against the grain of the poem, by its end one is himself in the state of oblivious aloneness, unable to remember exactly what it is that he is now beneath and beyond. Properly read, therefore, six of the ten lines of the poem are so forgettable as to be forgotten by the end of the poem: friends, love, family, living with care in time and in thoughtful relation to one's mortality, all such matters are as nothing compared to the comfort of ataraxic aloofness. To think of them would, in fact, destroy the poetic experience, a crucial part of which is the condition of obliviousness.

If a reader begins to fuss, recognizing that there is no hint in the poem that the nature of any of these aspects of living as a human being in the world has been experienced or even thought about by the large, untouchable, uncrushable self dismissing them, so that the dismissal is totally unconvincing and unconvincing, then one will be breaking the implicit contract of the poem, the assumption that the reader shares the poet's wants and will raise no questions if the poem fulfills them. Larkin's own response to such a reader of bad faith is implicit in the following comment which he made in his interview with Ian Hamilton:

There is nothing like writing poems for realizing how low the level of critical understanding is; maybe the average reader can understand what I say, but the above-average often can't.<sup>19</sup>

His "average reader" is, in my terms, one who keeps the faith, holding to the contract, submissively. His "above-average" reader is one who raises questions. In Larkin's terms, to raise questions is to read without understanding, to lack the generosity necessary for the reading of his poetry. He remains invulnerable, no matter what the carping of the critic. Yet that critic raises questions because he has read the poems not only with sympathetic understanding, but also with a reflective, critical understanding of their limitations. His discomfort with the poems, his not understanding them Larkin's way, coincides with his understanding them truthfully.

### III

Even though all Larkin's poems share the instability of being dependent on his actual readers' willingness to occupy unquestioningly the passive

position he has reserved for them, it is possible to distinguish the more successful from the less. The more successful will be those poems in which the devices used to bring the reader up to the ataraxia of the poet are inconspicuous. For if the reader notices the devices, as devices, he will become more rather than less alert, a ruinous turn for such poetry. Also, those poems will weather best in which Larkin has most effectively hidden the troublesome moral implications inherent in the dismissive attentiveness into which he would lure his audience, for his sort of euphoria cannot tolerate anything worrisome.

On the grounds, then, of the effective concealment of tricks in the means and of moral disturbances in the end, it should be evident that "Here," the opening poem of *The Whitsun Weddings*, will prove more durable than the title poem of that volume. Both poems depend on strategies and a moral flaw which must go unnoticed, if the reader is to enjoy the oblivious aloneness of the poems fully. Above all, readers must be kept from puzzling about the nature of the act of observing which is the basis of both poems. That critics of "Here" have already come close to such puzzling without actually lighting on it is a sign that it has the better chance of surviving undamaged.

The very obviousness of the main device of "Here" has perhaps kept it unnoticed. Grammatically, the first nine lines are a compound dangling modifier. The grammatical "error" goes unnoticed, however, because what dangles grammatically does in truth modify an unspecified, unspecifiable act of aloof attentiveness into which the reader obliviously escapes. Once there, once at one with that anonymous act, he will almost certainly ride out the poem in comfort. Although no critic has to my knowledge noted this quirk in grammar in relation to the invisible act of unreflective awareness, only one, Calvin Bedient, has betrayed a failure to experience it by improperly specifying it as taking place on a train.<sup>20</sup> A casual reading should bring out the inappropriateness of such placement.

### Here

Swerving east, from rich industrial shadows  
And traffic all night north; swerving through fields  
Too thin and thistled to be called meadows,  
And now and then a harsh-named halt, that shields  
Workmen at dawn; swerving to solitude  
Of skies and scarecrows, haystacks, hares and pheasants,  
And the widening river's slow presence,  
The piled gold clouds, the shining gull-marked mud,

Gathers to the surprise of a large town:  
Here domes and statues, spires and cranes cluster  
Beside grain-scattered streets, barge-crowded water,  
And residents from raw estates, brought down  
The dead straight miles by stealing flat-faced trolleys,  
Push through plate-glass swing doors to their desires—  
Cheap suits, red kitchen-ware, sharp shoes, iced lollies,  
Electric mixers, toasters, washers, driers—

A cut-price crowd, urban yet simple, dwelling  
Where only salesmen and relations come  
Within a terminate and fishy-smelling  
Pastoral of ships up streets, the slave museum,  
Tattoo-shops, consulates, grim head-scarfed wives;  
And out beyond its mortgaged half-built edges  
Fast-shadowed wheat-fields, running high as hedges,  
Isolate villages, where removed lives

Loneliness clarifies. Here silence stands  
Like heat. Here leaves unnoticed thicken,  
Hidden weeds flower, neglected waters quicken,  
Luminously-peopled air ascends;  
And past the poppies bluish neutral distance  
Ends the land suddenly beyond a beach  
Of shapes and shingle. Here is unfenced existence:  
Facing the sun, untalkative, out of reach.<sup>21</sup>

Though Larkin does ride a train in other poems, in this one, his swerving from “traffic all night north” suggests that his vehicle is a bus, turning off the M-1 in the direction of Hull. The “harsh-named halt” would not be a railway station, but a sheltered bus stop. The vehicle needn’t have halted at the halt, however, so it could as well be a car. What is important, however, is the lack of specification, a lack intended to help one feel unseen as he views the scene.

A more sensitive error is John Wain’s saying that Larkin’s life is one of those “removed lives// Loneliness clarifies,” for it nudges one in the right direction, even though it does not bring him to oblivious aloneness, which is altogether superior to anything involving loneliness.<sup>22</sup> Loneliness is a social condition, for the lonely are set apart from the “cut-price crowd”; whereas, as oblivious and alone, Larkin or you or me, any and all aloof, anonymous observers, are secure and at home, though radically alienated, wherever they may be, in the city or in an isolate village. The lonely, it is true, are closer to the alone than the crowd is; that is why they come after

the crowd in the movement of the poem, which is meant to lead the reader in a gentle swerve to that condition in the objective world which most nearly resembles the condition of the unobjectifiable act of observing which accompanies invisibly the lines of the poem from beginning to end.

Donald Davie commits an even more sensitive error in suggesting that Larkin has been imprecise in the lines "Here leaves unnoticed thicken,/ Hidden weeds flower, neglected waters quicken."<sup>23</sup> Larkin, he claims, does clearly notice the leaves, and so forth, so how can he call them unnoticed? Perhaps, Davie speculates, he meant to say that they go unnoticed by that "cut-price crowd." But Larkin is not so sloppy as that. What does not get mentioned throughout the poem, the unmentionable anonymous act of noticing, that is the only noticing the leaves get. Larkin himself does not notice them, for he has slipped his name by the time he is at one with that act of noticing. These lines, moreover, are part of Larkin's subtly non-symbolic technique of luring his reader unreflectively into a oneness with that hidden act of negligent noticing. In the last stanza he is simply setting down what is seen, just as he did in the other three stanzas, and what he sees does not in fact seem as interesting, at least in its details, as what has already been observed. But the tone rises, as though something important is happening. Larkin effects the rise in tone mainly by beginning the three sentences of the stanza (the other sentence of the poem covers the other three stanzas) with the title word "Here." "Here" by the end of the poem is "bluish neutral distance," is "unfenced existence:/ Facing the sun, untalkative, out of reach." The proper response to that is a brief, bemused "Hm, so what?" after which one goes about his business, without further thought. This casual, dismissive attitude is what is truly unfenced, even if "bluish neutral distance" comes closer to such freedom than anything else in the objective world does.

Davie, however, almost blows the poem apart with his last comment on it:

In Larkin's poem one detects a perverse determination that the ultimate ("terminate") pastoral shall be among the cut-price stores, and nowhere else. And the pity felt for the denizens of that pastoral, the "residents from raw estates," is more than a little contemptuous.<sup>24</sup>

From the start of the poem, Larkin's aim has been to ease his reader into the condition of that true "Here" which is nowhere, that hovering, unobjectifiable attending with which the reader is to identify himself unawares. From such an unlocatable locus, the attitude taken toward every object, toward everything objectifiable, not just toward that "cut-price crowd," will be a mixture of pity and contempt. Except that, in principle, every member of that crowd might himself be truly at one with the uncrushable act of

observing dismissively, so that, as part of that act, one may be enjoying a false sense of superiority by looking down, as he does, upon the crowd. Even so, it is Larkin who has lured him into that falseness, by contrasting the movement of the observing as a "swerving" to the straight line of the "traffic all night north," and then emphasizing the straightness of the crowd by having it "brought down/ The dead straight miles by stealing flat-faced trolleys." He is the one who has made one feel different from and superior to the crowd. He might well weasel, if confronted with this, saying that he did not really mean the contrast, that it was only a manner of speaking. Even admitting the truth of that, one may wonder if it is necessary to the sense of the value of unfenced attending that it be kept in constant contrast to the fenced quality of everything seen, imagined, or thought. One might even wonder whether it isn't a moral uneasiness which makes Larkin come out of the sure comfort of his aloof attentiveness to write poems. Perhaps he writes them so that he can feel superior to them. Or perhaps his comfort is unstable enough to need the reassurance of the belief that others are also of his way of thinking. Perhaps, however, "Here" would not have given rise to any questions at all, if Davie had not come at it with the idea that Larkin values the human scene more than the non-human scene. The truth, rather, is that Larkin values the human seeing as equally superior to the human and the nonhuman scenes. His weakness is that, because of the oblivious nature of that seeing, he must keep his preference itself hidden, so that it is imperative that his critics keep making mistakes.

Although "The Whitsun Weddings" was intended by Larkin as the centerpiece of *The Whitsun Weddings*, it is vulnerable as "Here" is not, and, for that matter, as its own counterparts in *The Less Deceived* and *High Windows*, "Church Going" and "The Building" are not. Because of his deep revulsion for the objective, existent world, Larkin cannot put himself as an identifiable human being into a poem except as an object of revulsion or at least as the butt of his anonymous mockery. In contrast to what he does in those other poems, in "The Whitsun Weddings," Larkin puts himself into the poem as an individual, observable entity, but without the slightest hint of mockery or revulsion. Even worse, toward the end of the poem, because attention is called to the breadth of the "I"'s awareness, in contrast to the self-absorption of those just married, and because of the ostentatious metaphorical flourish with which the poem ends, this "I," who as an entity existent within the objective world of the poem must have limits like its every other entity, is presented as possessing, as a poet, the value which only the illimitable, anonymous act of attending dismissively can have. As a result, the poem is tainted by smugness.

Instead of remaining safely hidden as in "Here," in "The Whitsun Wed-

dings” Larkin recklessly seats himself in a train heading south for London. In his characteristic way of noticing things, he first flattens nature with nature violated by industry, (“Wide farms” and “short-shadowed cattle” with “canals with floatings of industrial froth” and “acres of dismantled cars,”) and then proceeds to view the wedding participants in the same way he has viewed nonhuman nature and its man-caused violations. The participants are all presented as types (“The fathers with broad belts under their suits/ And seamy foreheads; mothers loud and fat,” and so forth) just as animals are noticed according to species and cars lumped together as dismantled. The first direct reference to the brides and bridegrooms, “Fresh couples climbed aboard,” might rather be a reference to cattle, and “A dozen marriages got under way” is a manner of speaking more fit for fruit than individual human beings. In themselves, such references scarcely warrant remark, since they are typical of Larkin’s attitude toward every object and entity in the existent world.

In this poem, however, they do deserve remark, because of the presence alongside them of the poet himself as just one more such entity who inexplicably and undeservedly escapes any and all dismissive glances and remarks. The reader cannot but observe Larkin looking and looking without ever being looked upon in return. Out the window, as the train leaves another station, he sees girls

In parodies of fashions, heels and veils,  
All posed irresolutely, watching us go,

As if out on the end of an event  
Waving goodbye  
To something that survived it.<sup>25</sup>

The “as if” is just a hint that perhaps nothing of a wedding does survive the event. The hint is corroborated two stanzas later; with all the couples aboard, the weddings have turned into “a dozen marriages.” The real moral problem, however, does not lie in Larkin’s cynicism, but in his observing without being observed. The “us,” of course, of “watching us go” is impersonal, referring to the whole train; if those on the platform focus at all, it will be on the married couple they have just seen off. Larkin is in a situation like that of Dante, in the thirteenth canto of the *Purgatorio*, where he and Vergil come upon those doing penance for their envy. They are seated in a row with their backs against the mountainside, the eyelids of each sewn together, so that they cannot see others, about whom they would then say belittling, cynical things, out of envy. Dante turns away from the view, because to him it seems a moral outrage to be looking at others without be-

ing looked back upon in turn. Though he may be proud, there is no streak of envy in Dante. In contrast, Larkin keeps staring at people who are unaware he is looking at them and who do not, as a result, gaze back at him. The anonymous, illimitable act by which the "cut-price crowd" of "Here" is dismissively attended to is, in essence, invisible and unobservable. In "The Whitsun Weddings," however, Larkin takes on the sovereign privileges of such invisible, unnameable observing even though he also presents himself as a visible, existent, individual entity. He should have recognized that such a hybrid is inadmissible in poetry the likes of his. By bringing the act of attending into the scene, he has unknowingly committed an obscenity, in the sense that he has brought on stage what by its nature must occur offstage.

The vice is compounded by the self-congratulatory professionalism of the end of the poem.

A dozen marriages got under way.  
They watched the landscape, sitting side by side  
—An Odeon went past, a cooling tower,  
And someone running up to bowl—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 as we raced across  
Bright knots of rail  
Past standing Pullmans, walls of blackened moss  
Came close, 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.<sup>26</sup>

It is stated as a fact that not one of the dozen couples gave a moment's thought to any of the others. After the statement, however, its unsettling grounds are provided, inadvertently: "I thought of London spread out in the sun,/ Its postal districts packed like squares of wheat." The thoughtlessness of the twelve couples is not, then, a fact, but rather the claim of this thoughtful "I", who is calling attention to his own attentiveness by way of contrast with all those others, who are much like cattle, self-absorbed, look-



ing without seeing. The unsettling aspect of this contrast can be sensed even in John Wain's praise of it:

The human actors in this scene, who will set up homes and mate and keep the human spectacle going, are unreflective: their world is the concrete and the immediate; if we are to have any such things as 'art'—whether poetry or any of the other arts—their actions need to be completed and interpreted by a brooding imaginative vision playing over them from a point of detachment. In a sense the poet's involvement is greater than theirs. . . .<sup>27</sup>

The trouble in the passage lies in the turn from art, poetry, a brooding imaginative vision, to "the poet's involvement," at which point one realizes that Wain is speaking in praise of his friend at the expense of all those others. If Larkin, as I believe, is making for himself, within the poem, the very same claim which Wain makes for him, then the last six lines of the poem should be read as follows. Sad it may be, but no significant change has occurred to the married couples. The specialness, the joy, the sacredness of the weddings does not survive the event. The show, the fireworks, the "arrow-shower," turns to rain. It fructifies, there are droppings of human babes, the populace grows and grows, naturally and thoughtlessly, like wheat. The couples copulate, reproduce, and in time will be fathers and mothers on station platforms, waving goodbye to their just married offspring. But the rain which the arrow-shower becomes is also the tears of us superior people, who observe "the association of man and woman/ In daunsing, signifying matrimonie—/ A dignified and commodious sacrament" and think of the unchanging cycle: "Feet rising and falling./ Eating and drinking. Dung and death."<sup>28</sup> The change that truly gives power is not that of marriage, but that of poetry. Consider, as the example of the poem, the change from the weary worker whose "three-quarters-empty train" pulled out "about/ One-twenty on the sunlit Saturday" to the "I" of this ending, loosing from his magnificently broad vision this grand metaphorical display. From just a weary one he has huffed and puffed till he is so big as to include all of England from Hull to London, all of London, and indeed a vision of all of life too. It is a very fine thing to be a poet.

Larkin, it is true, wrote the poem for the comfort of his audience, unreflective viewers rather than unreflective actors and carping critics. In the long run, however, even his own audience will prefer his unpretentious poems, those in which Larkin does not make the mistake of trying to define what is indefinable, of exhibiting what cannot be put on exhibit, that impersonal, invisible, never even quite audible act of observing dismissively.

## NOTES

- 1 "Absences," *The Less Deceived* (London: The Marvell Press, 1955), p. 40.
- 2 John Press, "The Poetry of Philip Larkin," *The Southern Review* XIII (January, 1977), p. 143.
- 3 Donald Davie, *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 68.
- 4 *Poet's Choice*, ed. P. Engle and J. Langland (New York: Dial Press, 1962), pp. 202-203.
- 5 *The London Magazine* v. IV, No. 6 (November, 1964), p. 76.
- 6 *High Windows* (London: Faber & Faber, 1974), p. 33.
- 7 *Moly* (London: Faber & Faber, 1971), pp. 53-54.
- 8 A. Alvarez, "The New Poetry, or Beyond the Gentility Principle," *The New Poetry* (Penguin, 1962), p. 24.
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- 10 Philip Larkin, *All What Jazz* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1970), p. 8.
- 11 Philip Larkin, *The North Ship* (London: Faber & Faber, 1973), p. 10.
- 12 W.B. Yeats, *The Collected Poems* (New York: Macmillan, 1956), p. 293.
- 13 Alvarez, op. cit., p. 26.
- 14 *The Less Deceived*, p. 45.
- 15 James Wright, *Collected Poems* (Wesleyan University Press, 1971), p. 135.
- 16 *All What Jazz*, p. 11.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- 18 *The Less Deceived*, p. 22.
- 19 *The London Magazine* v. IV, No. 6 (November, 1964), p. 76.
- 20 Calvin Bedient, *Eight Contemporary Poets* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 91.
- 21 *The Whitsun Weddings* (London: Faber & Faber, 1964), p. 9.
- 22 John Wain, "Engagement or Withdrawal? Some Notes on the Work of Philip Larkin," *Critical Quarterly* VI (1964), p. 174.
- 23 Davie, op. cit., p. 81.
- 24 *Ibid.*
- 25 *The Whitsun Weddings*, pp. 21-22.
- 26 *Ibid.*, pp. 22-23.
- 27 John Wain, op. cit., p. 175.
- 28 T.S. Eliot, "East Coker I," *The Complete Poems and Plays: 1909-1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1971), p. 124.