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EXISTENTIALISM AS HUMANISM IN PHILIP LARKIN'S
POETRY

*A Dissertation submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Magister in English
(Literature and Civilisation)*

by

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the research work in this dissertation is the result of my own efforts. Except where due recognition is expressed, the analysis and the critical interpretations are original and entirely individual. Acknowledgement and reference to the works of others is made whenever necessary. Hence, I insert here the statement of my responsibility for the critical opinions and other interpretations. Besides, I declare that this work has not been submitted to any other university or institution for the award of any degree.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my supervisor, Professor Abbès Bahous, my instructors of the theoretical year of postgraduate studies, and the members of the panel of examiners.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work is to my father and my mother whose sacrifices have brought me to this position, and to my brothers and sisters.

I dedicate it to my wife and my sons, Yani and Syphax, who missed me a lot when they most needed me at their sides during these three years of work on it.

ABSTRACT

This study explores the notions of Existentialism and Humanism in Philip Larkin's poetry. Relying on Jean Paul Sartre's idea that "Existentialism is Humanism", it aims at demonstrating that Larkin incorporated existentialist thought in his poems, which contributed to reinforce the humanist perspective in his poetry. Existentialism and Humanism are thus discussed in the light of Larkin's supposed negativist view of life. Consequently, his pessimism is taken as the starting point of the argument to show that beyond his potentially pessimistic view lies the belief in humanity's potential for transcendence and regeneration.

This binary perception of life, which is only one aspect of Larkin's dualistic perspective, is rendered here through the discussion of existentialism, first, and then of humanism. This dichotomous structure of this thesis stems from --but is also intended to shed more light on-- the tension that characterizes Larkin's texts. Larkin employed thus existentialism to show that in order to be 'human', Man needs to confront difficulties, his flaws, his contradictions, his predicament, and even his barbarity.

This work assumes that Larkin's dwelling on the negative side of life in general, contributes to highlight what is positive in it. Consequently, pessimism and optimism are examined together in order to allow the exploration of the philosophical view behind this dualistic perception.

Key-words: Philip Larkin, Poetry, Existentialism, Humanism, Optimism, Pessimism, Choice, Action, Freedom, Death, Time, Anxiety, Positivism, Negativism.

Abbreviations used in this study:

| | |
|----------|--|
| AWL | <i>A Writer's Life</i> (Andrew Motion) |
| CP | <i>Collected Poems</i> |
| HW | <i>High Windows</i> |
| EHE | <i>Existentialism and Human Emotions</i> (J.P. Sartre) |
| LJ | <i>Larkin's Jazz</i> |
| LYLPA | <i>"Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album"</i> |
| RW | <i>Required Writings</i> |
| The Wave | <i>"The Wave sings because It is Moving"</i> |
| TLD | <i>The Less Deceived</i> |
| TNS | <i>The North Ship</i> |
| TWW | <i>The Whitsun Weddings</i> |
| SL | <i>Selected Letters</i> |

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

When The English poet Philip Arthur Larkin started writing in the 1940s, Humanism was being questioned and Existentialism emerged and laid claim to the humanist heritage. It is the purpose of this study to show that his poetry can be read in the light of this controversy to demonstrate that his poetry bears an existentialist and a humanist content. This argument leans essentially on the charges of pessimism and negativity levelled against Larkin, to maintain that this aspect of his poetry is only one side of his binary view of life. This study aims thus to show that Larkin's pessimism is only an aspect of an existentialist and, more broadly, humanist view of life.

In his poetry, Larkin deals with universal issues and others in relation with everyday life in modern British society. The dichotomy 'expectation-experience' and its corollary 'dream-deception' pervade his texts, conferring thus to his poetry what many critics call a bleak attitude toward life. The tension generated by this internal debate, this opposition between pessimism and optimism, confers an ambiguous aspect to many of his texts. Consequently, on the one hand Larkin is believed to be pessimistic, on the other hand a 'realist' poet who simply refused illusion. Consequently his view of life is problematic for the reader. It cannot be easily proved to be totally positive or irrevocably negative as the two notions are interwoven in his poetry. It is even more difficult to decide if his insistence that his poems were based on experience is taken into account. Moreover the fact that immediacy is one of the major characteristics of the poetry of The Movement, of which Larkin is considered as the leading voice, makes the argument more complex.

In this study, it is assumed that these notions of pessimism and optimism are two aspects of the same view of life, and not forcedly radically exclusive. I propose thus to look beyond them to unveil the enabling conditions of this dualistic perspective. Consequently, in order not to be limited to one element of this dichotomy, this study proposes to examine these notions within the philosophical frame behind this tension. This would allow going beyond the simple commentary on the dyad 'happiness – sadness' and the reductive statement that his poetry is definitely pessimistic or optimistic. It would also permit to show that Larkin incorporated, unconsciously or on purpose, existentialism in his poetry in the same way as the existentialists used to do. Besides, this study aims to show that this existentialist content reinforces his belief in

Humanism. Consequently I suggest discussing pessimism and optimism in Larkin's poetry as an expression of an existentialist, and more broadly, humanist view of life according to the Sartrean thesis that Existentialism is Humanism.

I have chosen this perspective because, as far as I could know, Humanism expressed through an Existentialist outlook has not been studied in Larkin's poetry. While his texts bear considerable existentialist content, as can be seen in Chapter 2 of this study, critics, as will be shown in 'Relevant Criticism', the last section of Chapter 1 in this study, have just alluded to some themes and ideas of this philosophy. John Osborne, one of the most famous British playwrights of the 1950s, a critic, and a secretary of the Philip Larkin Society, in an article dealing with Existentialism in Larkin's poetry, concludes that Larkin's use of existentialist tenets in his texts is intended to dismantle this philosophy from within. Furthermore, very few have studied at length Humanism in Larkin's poetry.

That critics have not explored Existentialism in Larkin's poetry is understandable inasmuch as the poet himself did not claim any affiliation with this philosophy. Larkin is difficult to identify with any literary movement or school of thought, especially when we know that he said he did not believe in expressing philosophical opinions in poetry. Indeed the link between Existentialism and Humanism in his poetry has not been examined yet. Consequently, this study aims to find out that, in addition to expressing simply existentialist beliefs, the occurrence of existentialist themes in Larkin is, ultimately, an expression of a humanist outlook. The efforts of an individual to understand himself in an often hostile context, is a matter of self-realization, as understood by this philosophy. We assume thus that Philip Larkin, who lived at a time when Heidegger insisted on the crisis of the Western civilization, reawakening thus the interest in existentialist thought, while Sartre and Camus would mark their era a decade later, shared the dominant mood and thought of his time.

Rather than identifying the probable lines of direct influence, this study will examine the correspondences between the poems on the one hand, and the existentialist and humanist ideas on the other hand, juxtaposing the major themes in both Larkin and existentialist writers and philosophers. Through a study of poems taken from the posthumously published *Collected Poems*, mainly those included in his three major collections (*The Less Deceived* (1955), *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964), and *High Windows* (1974)), we will attempt to show that Larkin's pessimism, as an aspect

of existentialism, is very often counterbalanced with strong uplifting passages. This outlook is humanist by permitting optimism. Consequently, I have adopted a thematic analysis of a selection of poems connected to this topic, in the light of existentialist ideas, with special interest in the tension and the dualism at the heart of his poetry.

Through the dichotomy ‘pessimism-optimism’, this study is interested in Larkin’s wider binary view. The approach is mainly thematic; it relies on existentialism in general for analyzing the poems and on Sartre’s thesis that existentialism is humanism in interpreting the existentialist content as an expression of a humanist perception of life. It proceeds through a Leavisian close reading of a selection of texts relevant to the topic at hand.

The philosophically-based thematic approach is thought to be fit to study Philip Larkin as the speakers in his poems seem to be persons telling about their own experiences. The persona ‘philosophises’ in different situations as is reflected in several texts where questions are asked, and answered from a given perspective; and is even confused, in several ways, with the poet himself. This ‘subjectivity’ gives Larkin’s poetry the features of an autobiographical work. However, here, the personae are not equated with the author in every aspect of the analysis. The objective is to prove that Larkin’s poetry can be partially thought of as “a form of philosophy”.

I intend to study his four collections of poetry, and other poems, published in the posthumously issued volume, *Collected Poems*, and elsewhere. As the topic at hand is concerned with an exploration of Larkin’s worldview, I have decided to examine the whole body of his poetry available to me, including the poems he chose not to publish while alive. The study will be based on some prominent books and articles about Larkin, that have been accessible to me, among them Andrew Motion’s *Philip Larkin: A Writer’s Life*, Calvin Bedient’s *Eight Contemporary Poets*, David Timm’s *Philip Larkin*, Andrew Swarbrick’s *Out of Reach: the Poetry of Philip Larkin* and Anthony Thwaite’s *Selected Letters: 1940-1985*. I will rely on Sartre’s *Existentialism is a Humanism* as a theoretical frame, but also use quotes from some other prominent existentialist writers and philosophers to mark the parallels.

This dissertation starts by exploring how far existentialist ideas and themes are mirrored in Larkin’s poetry. Then it interprets them as an aspect of Humanism according to Jean Paul Sartre’s idea that Existentialism is Humanism. Finally, it discusses the occurrence of the humanist tenets in poems relevant to this thesis. Chapter One of this study presents Larkin, his poetry, and the major criticism of his

work relevant to this topic. Section one of this chapter consists of the biography of Philip Larkin, with the elements appropriate to the matter at hand. The next section contextualises Larkin, with glimpses at the major events of his lifetime, personal, literary, social, and political. Besides, Larkin's relation with the Movement is elicited here. Section 3 is devoted to Larkin's poetics and Section 4 highlights his major themes. The last section is a presentation of his three major collections of poetry.

Chapter Two examines the existentialist aspect of his poetry, starting with an exploration of the concept of pessimism in the light of existentialist tenets. The chapter sets to show that Larkin's poems are in fact an investigation of the "problematic character of the human situation" as the Existentialists put it. Thus the themes of loneliness, alienation, freedom, choice, action, time, death, the relation of man with the outside world, as well as that of the man with his own self will be discussed.

In chapter Three, the more positive Larkin is foregrounded in the light of humanist tenets. In addition to showing that, in the Sartrean line of thought, Larkin's Existentialism is Humanism, we will examine the idea of Humanism *per se* in his texts, i.e., consider how, independently from Existentialism, Larkin may be considered as a humanist. Accordingly, I will point to evidence of valuation of Man and life in his poems. I will also attempt to highlight Larkin's interest in social relations, love, generosity, sincerity and other humanistic characteristics. In this chapter I will examine the correspondences between his work and the humanist thought to reinforce the claim that Larkin's view of life may be said to be humanist. Here we set to elaborate on the idea that, from Sartre's and Heidegger's points of view, by revealing Man's flaws, Larkin can be said to contribute to the fashioning of a new consciousness of Man's reality. That is the need for Man, the frail creature condemned to be free and anxious in his paradoxical situation, to reconsider his own conception of himself in order to be efficient in his quest for meaning. The focus on the imperfections of Man can be seen as a way of making him aware of his responsibility.

A general conclusion stating the findings of this research will close the dissertation. It will be thus shown that Larkin's poems share enough with the humanist thought to lay claim on humanism. My hope is that my inquiry in the philosophical field for Larkin's vision of life that would have been a kind of undercurrent in his works will result in a new understanding of this major poet whose

works continue to fuel the most passionate debates among readers. This broadening of the sphere of investigation concerning Larkin's poetry permits to see beyond the simple observation that his poetry was "pessimistic", "optimistic", or even "comforting". This perspective takes into consideration Larkin's insistence on 'reality' and 'truth', two fundamental elements on which is built the assumption that Larkin wanted only to be 'realistic'. His poetry depicts frail and powerless Man within a hostile universe. This Man who, even when he deviates from the 'norms', remains faithful to the idea of surpassing the Human for something better. This can be seen in Larkin's rejection of social rules, conventions, institutions, and religion, for example, in order to convey the idea that what the 'crowd' believes is not always useful and beneficial for Man. These aspects are highlighted in Chapter 1, and discussed in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3.

CHAPTER 1

LARKIN, HIS POETRY, AND ITS RECEPTION

Section 1: Larkin's life

When Philip Larkin died of cancer on December 2, 1985, at the same age as his father (63), and of the same disease, 44 years earlier, he had already established his fame as one of the few great poets of Post-War Britain: a few months earlier, after the death of John Betjeman, he had turned down the office of Britain's Poet Laureate, which ended up going to Ted Hughes. However, he inherited the cultural place as for the public he was in fact the "other Poet Laureate". His fame rested on only three slim volumes of poetry issued, almost regularly, at an interval of about ten years: *The Less Deceived* (1955) (hereafter TLD), which established his reputation; *The Whitsun Weddings* (TWW) (1964); and *High Windows* (HW) (1974). For his first publications went almost unnoticed: *The North Ship* (1945) (hereafter TNS) could not get a large readership; and after six publishers had rejected his manuscript, Larkin published *XX Poems* (1951) at his own expense. But a considerable number of his poems were not published until after his death, when they were included in the *Collected Poems* edited by Anthony Thwaite in 1988.

Son of a city treasurer (Sidney Larkin) who had sympathy for Nazism¹ and a Mother (Eva) who was almost a dominated servant for her husband, Philip Larkin was born on August 9, 1922 at Coventry, an industrial town in the Midlands. At home, he grew up with his ten-year old sister, his mother, and father. The family received little or very few visits, and Larkin, later, spoke in equivocal and contradictory terms about his childhood. He both declared that it was happy and normal, and sad and uneventful,² and in his poetry it was "a forgotten boredom" (*Dockery and Son*).

¹ See Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life*, London: Faber and Faber, 1993. pp. 11-12.

² He said that he had a "Normal, happy childhood (...) lived in quite respectable houses (...) the house was full of books", (RW 47), and that it was "dull, pot-bound, and slightly mad" (quoted in "*Life at the Larkins: Philip Larkin*", *The Independent*, Sunday 14 March 1993). (See the whole excerpt taken from an unpublished autobiographical fragment written by Larkin in the 1950s, and found among his papers after his death, in www.independent.co.uk).

His father's harsh and cold personality, as well as the latter's admiration for Hitler's Germany, seems to have had a considerable effect on his later life and work¹. His fascination with the Right and fascism also influenced the teenage Larkin. The two visits Philip made with him to Germany "sowed (in him) the hatred of abroad" (RW 47). Some scholars believe that Larkin was forced to conceal this trauma throughout his life (Booth 10). Philip Larkin also admired Germany at a certain time before he changed his mind.² But Sidney Larkin did not only have negative effect on him. He also influenced his love for jazz and literary taste. He bought him musical instruments and lessons and had a rich library where Philip could shape his appetite for reading. His father transmitted him, in addition, his disbelief in Christianity and strongly influenced his political beliefs, too.

Sidney Larkin refused to send his son to a public school.³ He sent him instead on scholarship to King Henry VIII School in Coventry. After KHS, he went to St. John's College, in Oxford, as a scholarship student in English in 1940. At Oxford, Larkin befriended John Wain, Kingsley Amis and Bruce Montgomery, among others, with whom he shared his works. After his graduation in 1943, he occupied the position of librarian at Wellington. In 1946 he became Assistant Librarian at the University in Leicester where he met Monica Jones, a lecturer in poetry at the English Department. The choice of librarianship might have been decided because of his stammer that could have dissuaded him from teaching. While he could carry on with his studies at Oxford, thanks to his dismissal from military service for health reasons (poor eyesight), his friends were required to fight in the army. A year later he would say that he was "fundamentally (...) uninterested in the war", and kept this attitude till the end of the conflict. At school, Philip was loved by his mates as he mocked his teachers, and cherished by the latter because he was very polite towards them.

Larkin led a very simple life. He liked isolation, shying away from marriage and publicity. Although he had love interests and engaged in relationships of a sexual

¹He wrote that his "father (was) keen on Germany...had gone there to study their office methods and fallen in love with the place...he took us there twice; I think this sowed the seed of my hatred of abroad—not being able to talk to anyone, or read anything. (RW 47)

²In 1942, he believed that Hitler's Germany could have been "the finest country in the world" (Lachlan Makinon, "Reading Between the Lines: Silences in Philip Larkin's Prose"—(*The Observer*, Sunday 30 September 2001). And later, he wrote to his friend James Sutton: "I think Fascism is a bad thing – I think it is" (Qtd in James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Writer*, Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992. p. 11)

³He said "I would rather leave a child on the steps of an orphanage than send one to public school" (Qtd in Andrew Motion, *AWL*, P. 15)

nature, he never fully committed himself to any of his women and lived single all his life. For him, marriage was too demanding, and he preferred sharing his life with a number of women. Among them, there were his fellow lecturer Monica Jones, his library assistant Maeve Brennan, his secretary Betty Mackereth, Winifred Arnot, and the young Ruth Bowman he met at the university of Belfast. He had a problematic attitude toward sex, and women in general. Some believe that he really “had grown up to regard sexual recreation as a socially remote thing, like baccarat or clog dancing” (Booth 82). Larkin had a lifelong relationship with Monica, which went through very good and less happier moments. It was altered after his move to Belfast in 1950 and to Hull University Library in 1955. It was also affected by his friendships with other women. However, at her retirement in 1982, sick, she went to live with him in Hull, and he looked after her until his death. With her “strong critical opinions”, Monica’s influence on Larkin is believed to have been decisive (Booth 22). His relations with women are another aspect of his life which shows him torn between two opposite principles: the need of their company and the restrictions this entails.

Larkin was a voracious reader who started trying his hand at prose and poetry writing since his mid-teens. Philip Larkin was not only a poet. The inscription on his tombstone, chosen by his friend Monica Jones, is very simple: “Philip Larkin, 1922-1985, Writer”. Jones insisted that “he wasn’t just a poet” as he “lived a writer’s life”.¹ Indeed Larkin was a writer, and had strongly believed and desired to be a novelist before he turned to poetry: “You must realize I didn’t want to write poems at all, I wanted to write novels” (RW, 49). At the beginning of his career he tried his hand at prose fiction, but he could write only two novels, *Jim* (1946) and *A Girl in Winter* (1947), and failed to complete a third one. He was also a Jazz critic and published a small number of prose writings, collected in *Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces 1955-82* (1983). At his beginnings, while still at Oxford, he wrote, under the signature Brunette Coleman, *Trouble at Willow Gables*, a lesbian fiction work. Throughout his life he was anxious about his career.

His literary career is divided into three major periods. The first, characterized by great energy and hard work, starts with his first attempts at writing and publishing poetry in school magazines, in his teens, and runs until the publication of his first collection of

¹Quoted in Lachlan Mackinnon, “Reading Between the Lines: The Silences in Philip Larkin’s Prose, Collected in *Further Requirements, Speak Volumes*”, *The Observer*, Sunday 30 September 2001. (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2001/sep/30/poetry/highereducation>. 6 July 2010).

poetry in 1945. The second starts with the beginning of his professional life, in Leicester University library in 1946 and ends with his move to Belfast in 1950. This period is marked by a series of disappointments. From the literary point of view, disappointment came from his failure to complete his third novel and to publish his third volume of poetry which he would transform into *XX Poems* (1951) and publish at his expense. It was also marked by family life and relational disappointments. His father died in March 1948¹. To the ensuing grievance was added a furious anxiety due to his engagement with Ruth Bowman, a few weeks after the death of his father, and its subsequent breaking.² He said that he was worried about this girl and felt the experience ‘disturbing’, on the grounds of responsibility and freedom. Larkin believed that marriage was an obstacle on the road of art and a relation that needed much devotion and sacrifice.

Love difficulties and the death of his father seem to have hindered him in his literary career for a while. But these two elements are also believed to have been two major influencing factors in his writings. “*Deception*” and “*If my Darling*” are believed to have stemmed from his relational impasse. However, he was peculiar in seeing in this crisis not his own problem, but that of Man’s inability to equate “creative freedom and domestic responsibility” (Booth, 21). For him life without art is not worth living and he believed that the two were mutually exclusive. Consequently, for him, in addition to the limits it imposes on men, marriage bears the germs of destruction of art as is shown in “*To my wife*”. He was convinced of the high utility of art and fully committed to artistic creation.

This relational and literary anxiety was aggravated by the need to be close to his frequently sick mother. From 1948 to 1950, he lived with her. This was particularly consuming and the home background was constricting for him. This other crisis can be seen in poems such as “*Mother, Summer, I*” and “*Reference Back*” where he depicts failure. However he remained very close and attached to his mother until her

¹ On 4 April 1948, he completed an elegy on him entitled “*April Sunday Brings the Snow*”.

² On 18 May 1948, shortly after his engagement, he wrote to his friend James Sutton: “To tell you the truth I have done something odd myself – got engaged to Ruth on Monday. You know I have known her since 1943 or 4; well, we have gone on seeing each other until the point seemed to arrive when we either had to start taking it seriously or else drop it. I can’t say I welcome the thought of marriage, as it appears to me from the safe side of it, but nor do I want to desert the only girl I have met who doesn’t instantly frighten me away. It has been putting me backwards and forwards through the hoop for a long time now: ...no one could imagine me to be madly in love, and indeed I’m more ‘madly out of love’ than in love, so much so that I suspect all my isolationist feelings as possibly harmful and certainly rather despicable” (SL 147).

death and used to write to her regularly. More broadly, he was dissatisfied with his family relations in general.¹ In March 1949 he wrote to Sutton, synthesising these familial, literary and relational anxieties: “I have given up my novel & Ruth has given up me, not seeing, as you might say, any future in it. Nor do I! Therefore I am living a disagreeable life at this remnant of a home...” (SL 152). This period saw his shift from fiction to poetry after his discovery of the poetry of Hardy.

The third period of his career stretches from 1950, the year of his move to Belfast, to the late 1970s when he stopped writing. It is a period in which he wrote his major three collections. In Belfast his anxieties came to an end. He gained confidence and felt free thanks to “an independent income”, one of his major concerns. He said that this move was a turning point in his career:

After finishing my first books, say by 1945, I thought I had come to an end. I couldn't write another novel, I published nothing. My personal life was rather harassing. Then in 1950 I went to Belfast, and things reawoke somehow” (RW, 68).

In Ireland he had “the best writing conditions” (RW 58). From the relational point of view too, things grew better. He received visits of Monica and got in relation with Winifred Arnot, to whom “*Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album*” (hereafter *LYLPA*) and “*Maiden Name*” are believed to be dedicated. A short time later they got acquainted; Arnot went to London and got engaged. When she came back to Belfast, they continued to meet until her fiancé wrote a letter of complaint to Larkin who withdrew. Larkin's five Irish years are the most productive ones in his life. *TLD* is almost entirely written during this period. In 1955, he went back to the Midlands and settled in Hull. For Larkin had been in Hull, as a librarian, since March 1955. About his choice to live in Hull, he once said: “I like it because it's so far away from everywhere else...On the way to nowhere, as somebody put it...I very much feel the need to be at the periphery of things”². Hull appealed to him because he liked “living

¹On 19 April 1949, after the death of his father, he wrote to his friend James Sutton: “Tomorrow a jolly excursion to my father's grave, plus a pair of bastard silly old relatives, the whole well soured with irritation and complaining” (quoted in James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Writer*, (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), p. 23). And later: “I wouldn't want it though that I didn't like my parents. I did like them. But at the same time they were rather awkward people and not very good at being happy. And these things rub off” (RW, 49)

²In *Required Writings*, p. 54.

on the edge of things”. There he could work, read, and write. The poet kept writing more or less regularly until the mid-seventies, and somehow scarcely until the early eighties when, he said, the literary muse left him.¹ He continued nonetheless to produce some remarkable texts between the publication of his last collection (1974) and his death (1985), like “*Aubade*”, an uncollected poem written in 1977.

Larkin describes his childhood as uneventful, but happy (RW 47). In his poetry, however, it is a “forgotten boredom” (“*Coming*”) and “unspent” (“*I Remember, I Remember*”). This kind of ‘uneasiness’ with his bourgeois origins, combined with his belief that it was “not the place’s fault” caused him to bear “a profound grudge with his origins” (Booth, 10), an existential predicament which occurs in his poetry. While the war was raging across Europe, he was absorbed by his literary work. In a letter to Sutton (9 Feb 1945), he wrote that he “was solely *concerned with the paradox of producing a fresh, spontaneous-seeming narrative out of painful rewrites and corrections*” (quoted in Booth, p.11, emphasis mine). In 1972, at the age of 50, he felt that inspiration left him irrevocably. This ‘silence’ was aggravated with another move: that from his flat at the top floor in Pearson Park where he spent the last 18 years and where he wrote most of his poems, “after a day of work”, to a new house he bought near the university. During the last decade of his life, Larkin grew deaf and more and more isolated. His bachelor ‘independence’ was paradoxically limited by the life he shared with Monica Jones who, after her sickness, came to live with him. This aggravated his isolation, and Larkin proved to be more than lovely to her. He even refused invitations on the grounds that he had to stay with her:

...The fact is that M isn’t really up to ‘going out’ in the evenings, and I shouldn’t like to desert her on New Year’s Eve, which we have been in the habit of spending together...With all good wishes for this ominous New Year—personally I have no great hopes. (Unpublished letter, 27 Dec 1983, quoted in Booth 38).

But she would outlive him, as he died on 2 December 1985. On his death bed, his last words were to the nurse attending him: “I am going to the inevitable”², carrying thus his obsession with death until the very last moment of his life. During

¹ In a letter Mark Le Fanu, in June 1983, he wrote: “Indeed I should be delighted to write a poem for *The Author*, or for almost any other publication for that matter, but in fact poetry gave me up about six years ago, and I have no expectation of being revisited” (SL 696).

² In “*Going to the Inevitable*”, *The Independent*, Sunday 28 March 1993. (www.independent.co.uk)

his last ten years he wrote less and less as he felt that poetry that 'chose him and came to him' had irremediably gone¹. The posthumous publication of Andrew Motion Larkin's biography in 1993 and a series of selected letters he wrote to his friends by Anthony Thwaite (1992) set a serious blow to his reputation. These works revealed Larkin's racism, his obsession with pornography, and his claim of sympathy to the Right wing. These charges could not however alter the high quality of his verse and have been since challenged by most critics. Anyway, years after this turn, Larkin has regained his place among the few most important poets of the second half of the twentieth century in England. In all, he could make beauty out of difficulties and out of the desire of "shaking off the dread // That how we live measures our own nature" (*Mr Bleany*). This life of tensions and paradoxes bore in itself Existentialist and Humanist aspects.

¹ He said: "I didn't choose poetry: poetry chose me" (RW 62) and "...poetry gave me up six years ago, and I have no expectation of being revisited" (1983) (SL 696).

Section 2: Philip Larkin in his Time

2.1. The Context

Larkin was born a few years after the end of the First World War. His generation lived the crisis of 1929 and the subsequent Depression of the Thirties. Through this decade he witnessed hunger, marches by workers and the emigration of his fellow citizens in search of a better life abroad. Outside Britain, there was the rise of Hitler and Fascism as well as the Spanish Civil War. This turmoil contributed to shaping new perspectives on life in general and to imposing other viewpoints in art. However, these events, like the major experience of his time, i.e., WWII, do not occur in his poetry.

In 1940, Larkin joined Oxford and expected to be enrolled for war in 1941. But he was declared inapt for weak eyesight and could graduate in 1943. The first half of the decade was marked by the destructions of the war, though England's victory gave some pride to its citizens. To finance the war, the government resorted to debts. The war period, with its uncertainties, difficulties and restrictions, making the future unpredictable and sombre, seem to have strongly influenced Larkin¹. This might have aggravated the almost permanent threat he felt and his consciousness of sombre expectations in his writings. After the war, the financial position of the country was so difficult that the Labour government (1945-51) imposed controlling measures over economy, like the reduction of imports. The Attlee government era was known as "the years of austerity". Food and coal were rationed and it was not until 1951 and 1956 that these measures were suspended for the two categories of goods respectively. Wages were restrained and the Pound was devaluated in 1949. There followed however important growth rates between 1950 and 1973, though the lowest of the Western Europe. The major difficulties were in fact over with the return of Churchill to power in 1951. In 1957 Harold McMillan said about this period that it was the most prosperous in the history of England². Three years later, R.A. Butler insisted on the

¹ He writes: "At an age when self-importance would have been normal, events cut us ruthlessly down to size" (RW 18).

² He said: "Let's be frank about it; most of our people have never had it so good. Go around the country, go to the industrial towns, go to the farms and you will see a state of prosperity such as we have never had in my lifetime—nor indeed ever in the history of this country". (Childs David, *Britain Since 1945: A Political History*, London: Routledge, 2006. P69)

positive effects of the British politics of that period emphasizing the political, social and economic development of the country.¹

In the 1950s Britain entered a period of increased affluence and freedom, marking a shift in its culture. The Conservatives victory over the Labour at the 1951 General Election began an end of the State control to move to more individual freedom putting into practice their slogan to 'Set the People Free'. To the rationing of the war-period and of the late forties succeeded a wide availability of commodities. This shift caused the old social and cultural structures to be challenged, particularly by the young. By the end of the decade, the 'Americanisation' of the British way of life was realized. American products were being advertised thanks to the introduction of Commercial Television in 1955, after the deregulation of broadcasting in 1954. Easy access to colour magazines aided the development of advertising, a theme that would not escape Larkin's attention. This intrusion of the American culture was seen as a threat to traditions, a cultural degeneration, and denounced by some intellectuals while the majority of people welcomed it. The accurate observer Philip Larkin did not let this tension go unnoticed and built upon it several of his poems. It is during this decade that his most elaborate texts began to be written (*The Whitsun Weddings*).

The 1960s was an era of consumption, comfort and the youth revolution. Youth culture became dominant and teenagers imposed themselves as a social group. The generalized access to education permitted to many children of lower classes to get university degrees and consequently have access to higher ranks in society. As a consequence the social mobility increased considerably and the old Establishment values could no more hold and began to be seriously questioned. The sixties marked the divide between the conservative era in terms of sexual practices and the liberal one. This had become openly discussed and Larkin contributed his "*Annus Mirabilis*": "Sexual intercourse began/ In nineteen sixty-three / (Which was rather late for me)-/" This new sense of freedom in sex is also mirrored in "*High Windows*": "When I see a couple of kids/ And guess he is fucking her (...) I know this is paradise".

¹ He said: "we have developed...an affluent, open and democratic society, in which the class escalators are continually moving and in which people are divided not so much between 'haves' and 'have-nots' as between 'haves' and 'have-mores'"; (Quoted In: Gregory Eliot, *Labourism and the English Genius: The Strange Death of Labour England*, London: Biddles Ltd, 1993, p. 69.

This paradise was also a result of an increase in wealth, contact and exchange through mobility. The mass media helped guaranteeing individual freedom which the government was determined to promote. As a result there were profound transformations in British society and a sense of optimism. However, this feeling was counterbalanced by uncertainty. For the gained liberties were perceived by some as a threat to the established traditional social order. This tension between hope and despair (or pessimism and optimism) around which the debate between the pro and the anti-existentialists crystallized, is very visible in Larkin's poetry.

In literature, the 1940s saw the emergence of existentialism which dominated continental literature, to reach England only a few years later with Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. While Larkin was in Oxford, and started to write, there happened some major events in the history of English literature that caused what John Press calls a turn in the history of British literature.¹ This turn found its full expression right from the beginning of the fifties. In fact the decade saw the emergence of different sensibilities, all rejecting the dominant mood in writing.

There were the Angry Young Men, with Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, the Movement, the Group and the 'frenchified' Absurdist. Many of those writers lived their childhood or adolescence during the difficult years of the Depression of the thirties followed by the destructive period of the war. They witnessed, in the 1930s and 1940s, the emergence of what would be known as Existentialism thanks to Heidegger, Jaspers, Sartre and Camus. This happened as Europe found itself threatened by destruction both morally and physically. The advance of ideas such as fascism and Nazism and the two world wars of the century alarmed the intellectuals. In the previous century, Kierkegaard considered that the Western world was in a continual process of fall since Plato because of the one-sided development giving only importance to technological advance at the expense of human relations².

¹ This turn was marked by artistic events like the death of Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and Auden's exile to America, rather than by the war. (See John Press, *Rule and Energy: Trends in British Poetry since the Second World War*, London: Oxford University Press, 1963, pp. 1-2)

² Brian T. Prosser, and Andrew Ward, "Kierkegaard's 'Mystery Of Unrighteousness' In The Information Age", University of Aberdeen, (www.abdn.ac.uk/philosophy/endsandmeans/vol5no2/prosser_ward.shtml)

2. 2. Larkin and The Movement

Larkin is associated with the Movement, a term coined by J. D. Scott in 1954 designating a group of poets prominent in the fifties, which included also Ted Hughes, Tom Gunn, John Wain, Kingsley Amis, Donald Davie, D. J. Enright, John Wain, Elizabeth Jennings, and Robert Conquest. Although these poets were not organised in a definite school with its proper manifestos or ideology, together they marked the emergence of the lower middle class intelligentsia. These petit-bourgeois poets, originating in provincial grammar schools, were impatient with the Establishment, but ultimately neutral. The Movement was given form in 1956 with the publication, by Robert Conquest, of the anthology *The New Lines*. It crystallized around friendships formed in Oxford and Cambridge giving to this 'new trend' an academic character and origin: six of the nine poets appearing in the anthology were university teachers.

These poets believed that poetry should employ reason and intellect in making sense of what it contemplated. For them intelligence and intelligibility should be essential virtues in poetry. They rejected the irrationality, the deliberate incoherence and the "outrageous" and "controversial" aspect of the New Apocalyptics, rehabilitating thus some humanist values. As anti-romantics, they insisted on rationality, and sobriety both in themes and form¹. Emulating the Augustans' empiricism as well as their metrical norms, these poets were resolved to restore the taste of the poetry-reading public by giving importance to technical excellence. They consequently initiated a style which was "intellectual, witty and carefully crafted." Their poetry rejects systems of thought, mysticism and is empirical while sticking to simple language and structure. These poets kept themselves at a distance with politics and social doctrines. They overtly expressed their dislike of the free verse and the emotional tone in poetry tending thus to reconstruct Neoclassicism and opposing the experimentations of modernism. Although they were gathered in the same anthologies and appeared in the same radio programmes for example, the

¹ Larkin expressed his opposition to Romanticism explicitly and implicitly as in his rejection of the famous dichotomy of Keats's "*Ode on a Grecian Urn*", "Truth is beauty and beauty is truth...": "I have always believed that beauty is beauty, truth truth, that is not all ye know on earth nor all ye need to know, and I think a person usually starts off either from the feeling How beautiful that is or from the feeling How true that is. One of the jobs of a poem is to make the beautiful seem true and the true beautiful". (Qtd in T.A. Whalen, *Larkin and English Poetry*, London: Macmillan, 1986, p. 54)

Movement poets denied being involved in any particular definite trend. Summing up the Movement poets' writing, John Press says:

Poetry, they (the Movement poets) seem to say, should observe the world coolly and intelligently, construct satisfying patterns, employ rational processes of thought, try to make sense of what it contemplates. They all display a cautious scepticism, favour an empirical attitude...and examine a problem with an alert wariness.¹

The austerity of the 1950s participated in making the poets of the Movement react against the social Utopianism² of their predecessors in the 1930s and the Neo-Romantic excesses of the New Apocalypics in the forties.³ Maintaining that the Movement poets were of their own time and that their attack was really contemporary, Robert Conquest insists however that their standpoint was not new as without being a repetition, their endeavour aimed to restore "a sound and fruitful attitude to poetry, of the principle that poetry is written by and for the whole man, intellect, emotions, senses and all"⁴.

As to Larkin's, the reaction to the Movement poetry was diverse. Alvarez appreciated it.⁵ Charles Thomlinson contemptuously rejected it as "middle-cum-lowbrainism"⁶. If The Movement created a "period of conservation rather than innovation" in poetry⁷, it had adversaries nonetheless. Andrew Swarbrick reports that Charles Tomlinson, in 1957, "argued that Movement poetry was insufficiently ambitious, that it did not demand enough either of the poet or the reader, that poetry in the hands of the Movement was too deferential to the expectations of the reader"⁸. Blake Morrison, on his part, attempted a reconciling view and pointed to the tension

¹John Press, *Rule and Energy : Trends in British Poetry since the Second World War*, (London, 1963), p. 45.

²For example, Cecil Day Lewis asked "what about making a god society now?" in response to the belief of "living for the afterlife". (Qtd in Diane Manuel, 'News Release', Stanford University, 1998. www.Stanford.edu (18 Sept. 2010)

³David Morley speaks of the New Apocalypics' "concentration on (...) surrealism and linguistic obscurity (...) hysterical and affected concept of poetry" (In "From the Apocalypse to the Movement", The Warwick University, Nov. 2006. <www2.warwick.ac.uk> (25 Jan. 2011)

⁴Qtd in "From the Apocalypse to the Movement: Poetry in English since 1945", www.ac.uk

⁵He saw that these university teachers, produced "academic-administrative verse, polite, knowledgeable, efficient, polished, and, in its quiet way, even intelligent" (Quoted in Lidia Vianu, *British Desperadoes at the turn of the millennium*, Bucarest: LiterNet Publishing House, 2005)

⁶Quoted in Ana-Maria Tupan, *A survey course in the British Literature*, Bucharest: Editura Universitatii, 2004. <www.ebook.unibuc.ro> (21 October 2010)

⁷Andrew Swarbrick, *Out of Reach: The Poetry of Philip Larkin* (London: Macmillan, 1995), p 74.

⁸Ibid., p. 4

between the “academism” and “philistinism” in the works of the poets of the Movement and suggested, instead, considering these two opposite sides.¹

Like for the other facets of Larkin’s poetry, the question of ideology in the Movement was differently interpreted. Some see that the Movement was devoid of it; others find that it was only expressed in a “diffident rather than blasting manifesto”² while others, like Robert Conquest, saw these poets as “a group of doctrine-saddled writers forming a definite school complete with programme and rules”.³ Larkin unofficially became a leading figure of this trend, essentially English in character, not including poets from other parts of the UK. Philip Larkin himself was an English poet, novelist and jazz critic; Kingsley William Amis (1922-1995) an English novelist, poet, critic, and teacher; John Wain (1925 - 1994) was an English poet, novelist, and critic, associated also with the Group. In the 1960s the Movement receded under the growing prosperity of England. However this did not influence the reputation of Larkin who sought to free poetry from the ‘dictatorship’ of the academia believing that “at bottom, poetry, like all arts, is inextricably bound up with giving pleasure, and if a poet loses his pleasure-seeking audience he has lost the only audience worth having” (RW 82).

¹ He writes: “The critic of the Movement is faced, then, with a series of divisions. On the one hand, the Movement enjoys and exploits the sense of belonging to an academic élite; on the other hand, it disapproves of writing aimed at such an élite. On the one hand, it asserts the importance of university teachers and critics; on the other, it questions and satirizes their function. On the one hand, it declares that to write for a larger audience is damaging; on the other, it declares that it is valuable and necessary. On the one hand, its work is dense, allusive, intimate with fellow intellectuals; on the other, its work is simple, ‘accessible’, intimate with an imagined Common Reader. Previous critics of the Movement have tended to emphasize one side or the other, accusing it of “academicism” or of “philistinism”; the truth is that the work of the Movement is characterized by a tension between the two”. (Blake Morrison, *The Movement: English Poetry and Fiction of the 1950s*, London: Oxford University Press: 1980, pp. 134-135).

² Robert Conquest, “Introduction”, *New Lines* (London: Macmillan, 1956), pp. XIV-XV. (Quoted in Stephania Michelucci, *The Poetry of Thom Gunn: A Critical Study* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009,) p. 15.

³Ana-Maria, Tupan, *A Survey Course in British Literature*, University of Bucharest, (www.ebooks.unibuc.ro) (26 Sept. 2010)

Section 3: Larkin's Poetry

3.1. Larkin's Poetics

Philip Larkin once said that he wrote two kinds of poems: the true and the beautiful. When asked to contribute to a poetry collection in 1973, he chose “*MCMXIV*” and “*Send No Money*” because

they might be taken as representative examples of the two kinds of poem I sometimes think I write: the beautiful and the true . . . I think a poem usually starts off either from the feeling How beautiful that is or from the feeling How true that is. One of the jobs of the poem is to make the beautiful seem true and the true beautiful, but in fact the disguise can usually be penetrated.¹

As will be seen in Chapter Three (Humanism in Larkin's Poetry), these ideas of truth and beauty, as elements of his quest for meaning in life, pervade his poetry. Larkin is believed to be a ‘poet of truth’ as well as an artist capable of higher forms of beautiful verse. This ability of deriving beauty from ugliness is of a particular interest for this study. Another noticeable fact is his claim that it is not worth looking deep into his texts as everything is on the surface of the poems². Because, as will be shown hereafter, beyond this acclaimed simplicity lies a difficulty characteristic of his poetry: ambivalence and polyphony in his texts. This complexity is achieved through multiple devices, among them the word-play, polysemy, and irony. Besides, his claim that his major concern in writing is to “perpetuate an experience” by preserving it³ is of a notable importance in this study.

¹Quoted in James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Writer*, (London, 1992), p.1.

²He wrote: “I think in one sense I’m like Evelyn Waugh or John Betjeman, in that there’s not much to *say* about my work. When you’ve read a poem, that’s it, it’s all quite clear what it means” (RW 53-54).

³He said: “I write poems to preserve things I have seen/ thought/ and felt...both for myself and for others, though I feel that my prime responsibility is to the experience itself, which I am trying to keep from oblivion for its own sake...I think the impulse to preserve lies at the bottom of all art” (RW 79).

Larkin assured this preservation by adopting a “photographic” mode to write “accessible poetry”. He said that he was more concerned with ‘experience’ than being inspired by artists or interested in contemplations¹. He wanted poetry to be accessible for everyone. It needed, he said, to be freed from the dictatorship of the criticism industry. He consequently adopted a simple, realist, photographic mode of writing. In a correspondence to Conquest, Larkin thus defined his aesthetics:

I feel we have got the method right – plain language, absence of posturings, sense of proportion, humour, abandonment of the dithyrambic ideal – and are waiting for the matter: a fuller and more sensitive response to life as it appears from day to day.²

It is of a noticeable significance that this ‘inscrutable’ and ‘detached’ man could write about ordinary and daily sensitive response to life. This is one of the ironies that characterize Philip Larkin and his work. However, although he insisted that his poems were reflections of personal experiences, he resists biographical criticism nonetheless. In 1947, when he wrote in “*High Windows*”: “When I see a couple of kids and guess he’s fucking her/ I know this is paradise” comparing this to his own youth “forty years go”, he was in fact only twenty-five.

His mature work marks break with the Neoromantic and the modernist movement in general. He advocated a return to traditional form of verse. He used stanzas and other traditional devices, like rhyme and the iambic pentameter. He used colloquial and coarse language, and usually balanced it by a highly poetic one. When Larkin wrote “*This Be the Verse*” (HW, CP 142), opening with “They fuck you up your mum and dad / They may not mean to but they do” people felt shocked. However, this was not his first ‘offence’ to morals. Indeed felt that he only used the “language spoken by the ordinary Man”. He wanted poetry to be accessible to the common reader. In an interview with the British literary critic, Robert Ian Hamilton, he said that he was against the critical industry, which, under the influence of the modernists,

¹ He said: “As a guiding principle I believe that every poem must be its own sole-freshly-created universe and therefore have no belief in ‘tradition’ or a common myth-kitty or casual allusions in poems to other poems or poets...” (RW 79)

² This correspondence was not intended to be edited, but Conquest published it in his introduction to his anthology *New Lines*. (Quoted in Michael O’Neill, and Madeleine Callaghan, *Twentieth-Century British and Irish Poetry: Hardy to Mahon*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2011, p. 151.)

moved the interest from the human life as it is known to abstract considerations. He considered that one did not need to master classical and biblical mythology to have access to poetry pleading for ‘simplicity’ and ordinariness. The fact is that Larkin dwelt on experiences of deception. As the title-poem of *HW* suggests, there is the feeling that the promises, or the dreams, are never realized. Man is thus left to console himself by believing that his “ache” would come to an end and his hopes to fruition.

3.2. Larkin’s Major Themes

His biographer, Andrew Motion, writes that Larkin “tackles the big, central issues of ordinary life in the language of ordinary speech and makes them numinous” and that he became “one of the means by which his country recognized itself” (Motion: *AWL* 343). This confrontation between the ‘big’, the ‘central’ on the one hand and the simple or the ‘ordinary’ on the other hand leading to something ‘luminous’ is central in interpreting Larkin’s poetry. This metonymic ‘truth’ of a member (the poet) representing the whole body (his country) often occurs in his poetry too.

Larkin wrote about discontent in life to tell his ‘truths’. The speakers and the personae in his poems lack social contact, love, sex and happiness. Consequently they seem to be always long for them. The truth is that they continuously intervene in a process of meaning-making. Larkin’s personae live and maintain that “Life is first boredom, then fear” (“*Dockery and Son*”). ‘Boredom’ is the daily routine of existence, ‘fear’ a part of man’s essence because it becomes one of his life’s permanent features. This meaning and truth stem straight from the fact of writing about the existentialist “individual in the world”. Larkin thus depicts the worth of life through the humane qualities of the individual. He insists on the themes of loneliness, choice, loss, love, the passage of time and ageing, deceived expectations, death, the relation between the individual and the outside world and religion. Larkin’s claim that his texts spring from experience, relates in fact more to his own perception of the events than to their happenings. This way, every experience becomes something really new, even if it is concerned with the same repeated event. Indeed as experience is rooted in time, it is all the more threatened by nothingness. It might pretend to infinity or get to an end and be forgotten.

This is why time and death are among the dominant themes in Larkin's poetry. In his poems, Larkin does not protest about their 'power' for example, nor does he use them to urge people to focus on life because "Whether or not we use it, it goes" ("*Dockery and Son*"). He just observes that time has a strong power of erosion and death is "inevitable".

The passage of time makes things "...lacerate/ Simply by being over" and aged people "Contract (the) heart by looking *out of date*" ("*LYLPA*") (emphasis mine). The 'lines' of the title of this opening poem of TLS are in fact the wrinkles on the face of the lady, and as such, a direct effect of time. Time ruins her beauty and contradicts the past promises, and the future has inevitably no other thing to promise except "the sure extinction". This flux reminds us of the Existentialist belief in life as perpetual change while the photograph in this poem holds the past unchanged. In "*Faith Healing*", through time, the women realize that they have no possibility of being loved. Ageing is thus one of his other most developed themes. Old people, for Larkin, are somewhere between life and death as this can be seen in "*Heads in the Women's Ward*" (CP 183) and "*The Old Fools*" (HW, CP 131), for instance.

More concerned with the existentialist predicament, he rather dealt with the thought of death than with its occurrence or effects. This 'philosophising' lends a humanist concern with life, through his "fear of death", to his perspective. One can see that he hated the thought of this "sure extinction that we travel to," ("*Aubade*", CP). In many of these poems, though, Larkin manages to avoid the word "death" preferring the general substitutions such as "what is left to come" or the "wild white face". Thwarted expectations, bringing an "immense slackening ache", is another major theme of Larkin. The gap between 'dreams' and experience occupies a large place in his three collections of poetry. In "*Faith Healing*" the women cry because they suddenly realize that it is impossible for them to find love in life.

Larkin's interest in the predicament of the "man in the world" is also expressed through his discussion of the relation between Man and nature. "*Cut Grass*" and "*The Trees*" are celebrations of nature. For instance, the sun is a generous and almost venerated "origin" in "*Solar*", and in "*Wedding Wind*" nature is violent as the wind rages outside. But, paradoxically, the bride is happy and expresses her regret that any creature could not share her joy that night. She lends nature her own feelings: "These

new *delighted* lakes, conclude/ Our kneeling as cattle by *all-generous* waters”
(Emphasis mine).

Section 4: His Poetry Collections

4.1. *The North Ship*

His first volume of poetry, *The North Ship* (1945), contains 33 poems. The work was almost unnoticed and Larkin himself expressed later his dissatisfaction with it¹. However, though not a success, it foreshadowed his major themes: loneliness, isolation, the relation Man-world, time, death, deception, social relations and Englishness. The collection reflected modernist and. Here, Larkin tried to imitate Yeats and, to a lesser degree, T. S. Eliot. This, as he would say later, hindered him from shaping his own identity. This collection is however, not without any interest in studying his poetry. For, from the artistic and aesthetic point of view, it contains some passages which announced the mature Larkin. In this book Larkin showed an influence of W. B. Yeats, the “Celtic fever”, Vernon Watkins transmitted him while on a visit at the English Club in Oxford in 1943 (RW 29). But this did not last too long as in 1946, Larkin discovered, as he said, Thomas Hardy’s poetry. With Hardy he learned how to “write successful poems out of the ordinary and the commonplace of the everyday experience” and the “reaction came, undramatic, complete and permanent” (RW29). Hardy’s influence was to be the major force leading to his second volume, *The Less Deceived*, and the subsequent two other collections. It is also visible in his other, uncollected, poems posterior to 1946. He liked in Hardy his being “well equipped to perceive the melancholy, the misfortunate, the frustrating, the failing elements of life” (RW 172).

¹ Larkin writes about TNS: “looking at the collection today, it seems amazing that anyone should have offered to publish it...” (RW 27) and further: “Then, as now, I could never contemplate it without a twinge, faint or powerful, of shame compounded with disappointment” (RW 28).

4.2. *The Less Deceived*

The Less Deceived (1955) revealed Larkin as one of the major poets of his time, and a leading voice of The Movement. The booklet contains 29 poems, some of which do not exceed 10 lines, and only four running to the second page. It opens with “*Lines on a Young lady’s Photograph Album*” and ends with “*At Grass*”. The central poem of the collection “*Church Going*” is one of Larkin’s major texts. Andrew Swarbrick suggests that the book’s title echoes Ophelia’s words in *Hamlet*¹. Originally, it was intended to be the title of what would be later ‘*Deceptions*’, a poem disclosing the reaction of the speaker to the desolate words of a raped young girl. Larkin changed it on the publisher’s request. Commenting the choice of this title, he wrote to George Hartley that this one could give a “certain amount of sad-eyed (and clear-eyed) realism”². Indeed it bears a clue to the overall mood of disenchantment that characterizes this collection.

In this volume, Larkin focussed on intense personal emotion, but avoided sentimentality and self-pity. “*The Less Deceived*”, alluding to the romantic unrealizable ideals of fulfilment and escape, informs on the volume’s critique of the “bad habits of expectancy” (*Next Please*). Larkin’s satire on Romanticism is also expressed in his derision and refusal to be emotionally attached to particular places or persons as is expressed in “*Places, Loved Ones*” and “*I Remember, I Remember*”. Against romanticism, Larkin adopts a photographic mode of writing in order to be “realistic”. Photography is “faithful and disappointing”; it “records dull days as dull...”

Poems such as “*No Road*” and “*If My Darling*” deal with love deceptions; and “*Wedding Wind*” with the uncertainty of marriage. Some readers make a link between Larkin’s relation with Ruth Bowman and the content of these poems believing that they are interpretations of their love and the interruption of his engagement to her.³ The disappointment with sexual desire, leading to resisting its drive, shows another

¹ Andrew Swarbrick, *Out of Reach: The Poetry of Philip Larkin*, (London, 1983), p. 43.

The dialogue between Hamlet and Ophelia in Act Three, Scene One in *Hamlet* has it: “I was the more deceived” when Hamlet says to her “...I did love you” and immediately after she retorts, “Indeed my Lord, you made me believe so,” he adds: “...I loved you not”. (Qtd in William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Bejaia: Talantikit, 2009, p. 75.

² Quoted in Andrew Swarbrick, *Out of Reach*, p.43

³ See Motion, AWL, pp. 137-139, for example.

conflicting dyad: communality and privacy. In “*Dry Point*” and “*Reasons for Attendance*” the speakers escape society and resist sexual desire.

Faithful to his problematic and dualistic approach to life in general, Larkin extends these love anxieties to suggest, in “*Latest Face*” for example, “how erotic desire is preserved not in fulfilment but in deferral” (Swarbrick, 46). This problem of experience usually contradicting desire is also expressed in his prose writings. In a letter to his friend Sutton, in July 1950, he wrote: “remote things seem desirable. Bring them close, and I start shitting myself”.¹ Wants, choice, action, escapism and desire for oblivion represent stops in the cycle of expectations and deceptions. Beyond desire, there is only death which is seen as another drive in Larkin revealing once again existentialist torment².

The discrepancies between experience and expectations, ever diminishing hope and the tension between ideas and their contraries, or “meaning and meaning's rebuttal” (“*If, My Darling*”) are elements Larkin puts into contribution to refute the received ideas. As Larkin insists that his poems are based on experience, these texts can be linked to his own disappointments both in love and art as he longed for fame and success³. Here in fact might lie the convergence between experience and context.

In other poems, in *TLD* or in the subsequent volumes, as we will see, this theme is given the “lion's share” (“*Reasons for Attendance*”). Artistically, this collection marks the move from *TNS* lyricism to dramatic expression through mockery and irony. Here, too, Larkin is concerned with time, identity, truth, choice and love, whose output is, generally deceiving. However this bleakness is confronted by strong positive passages or whole poems at times, like in “*Wedding Wind*”, “*Coming*”, and “*At Grass*”.

Religion and its inability to provide solutions for the problems of a more and more secular and materialist world is one of the other main themes of this collection. Its central and longest poem, “*Church Going*”, discusses the relevance of religious practice in the 20th century. The deception is not only artistic or spiritual. It originates

¹ Quoted in James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Writer*, (London,1992), p. 21.

² Spiros Doikas, Writes that in Larkin, Beyond desire, there is death as another drive(See “*Eros, Thanatos and the Negation of the Will-to-Live in Philip Larkin's Poetry*”,in < www.philiplarkin.com>.

³ These texts can be linked to his own disappointments both in love (disappointment with Ruth Bowman) and art (“inability” to write for years) and his longing for fame and success

also in the tension between desire and experience which is, here again, one of the other major themes.

From the artistic point of view, his pessimism is qualified by the extensive use of irony and humorous colloquialisms. The collection has been noticed for the special observance of formal structure as the poems are in stanzaic form and cautiously rhymed. The use of metre and stanzas in accordance with the content, the mood and the evolution of the description or narration add to the strict observance of formal structures. Larkin displays here too a strong sense of observation and builds up his poems upon vivid images. His 'onlookers' show reticence to merge in the "crowds" they generally are attracted to, though sometimes they make unexpected steps towards them and display strong emotions and gestures.

4.3. *The Whitsun Weddings*

The Whitsun Weddings (1964), another slim collection of 32 poems, confirmed his renown as a great poet. Four thousand copies were sold in a few months.¹ Universal themes are once more tackled in simple language. The poems discuss social relations, the situation of the individual in the world, the issue of the self, the preoccupation with time and death, among other themes. The issue of marriage and relationships is discussed for example in the title poem, also the central one², "*The Whitsun Weddings*", one of Larkin's most known texts. It depicts a train journey in which the speaker sees, at the stations, freshly wed couples leaving for their honeymoon, with their relatives bidding them farewell. There he sees the "pomaded girls in parodies of fashion", "the uncles shouting smut", the "jewellery-substitutes" and the "perms" which seem to upset him. But later, the speaker values this "frail travelling coincidence" and joins the couples through the substitution of the pronoun "we" to the initial detached "I". The last image, an "arrow-shower...somewhere becoming rain", suggests life and fertility, hope and optimism. The poem embodies the Sartrean idea that existence precedes essence, as the travellers are in the end "loaded with the sum of all they saw".

This idea of existentialism participating in shaping a humanist view is supported by the discussion of humane qualities. Love is discussed in "*Love Songs In Age*", a

¹ In www.en.wikipedia.org and www.enotes.com

² Larkin insisted on his cautious arrangement of his poems in the collections

poem about an old widowed woman who remembers her youth as she accidentally finds her old music records. She is deceived to realise that too much time has passed and that her youth is gone. Love has not survived but Larkin suggests that it is the fundamentals of love, not its illusions that are important. "*Mr. Bleaney*" and other poems discuss social isolation. Mr Bleaney is an old man who lived in a small and poorly furnished hotel room. The simple and ordinary furniture was all he could "show" when he died. However, the speaker ends by familiarising himself with him as he decides to take the room. This absurd stance of life embodies the simplicity and the need of merging with others whatever their social status and origin.

Thus the disparity between what is really lived and what is expected is depicted in "*Essential Beauty*" for example. The poem deals with the difference between the ideal world of advertising and the grim reality of the everyday life. The "cover slums" with "golden butter...well balanced families" and "slippers on warm mats" contrast sharply with the boy "puking his heart out", "the dying smokers". This disparity is closely linked to time as time proves that the dreams of the past are only myths.

This effect of the passage of time is discussed in several poems, like "*Whitsun Weddings*" and "*An Arundel Tomb*". "*An Arundel Tomb*" discloses two contradictory elements: the earl and the countess lie hand in hand, in love; but the statue is being eroded. Larkin insists here on both the strength of time and the resistance of love. This resistance is subordinated to the sincerity of the couple because it will be efficient only if they do not "lie". This erosion should lead to death; consequently, the speaker (persona) is scared by the "unenclosed endless space" this would lead to. But, paradoxically, this speaker seems to respond to the death-drive. Another poem, "*Ambulances*", ends by calmly admitting that death is inevitable as it "brings closer what is left to come, /And dulls to distance all we are."

4.4 High Windows

High windows, Larkin's last collection consolidates his renown as a great poet. It "changed Larkin's life more decisively than any of his previous collections...turned him into a national monument" (Motion, 446). Six thousand copies were sold in three weeks.¹ The paradox with this success is that it would toll Larkin's "end". He, in fact, felt he would be pushed to silence. In 1972 he complained about difficulties of development² and felt he would inevitably be silenced.

In this collection, he is, again, concerned with identity, the value of art, old age, death, desperation, anxiety, the relation self-community, alienation and loneliness, choice, action, duty and responsibility. The quest for identity is expressed through the expression "think of being them" (*Toads Revisited*). In his real life, too, Larkin was sometimes dissatisfied with himself³. He was ultimately disillusioned with life and art, and was, consequently, angry. One of the characteristics of this collection is the use of the four-letter words. Lines or sentences such as "They fuck you up your mum and dad" and "books are loads of crap" tell enough about this spirit. However, in this collection, Larkin, paradoxically, asserts the worth of life in the face of age and death, as can be seen in *The Old Fools*. He also confirms the worth of communality (*The Building*) and social relations and rituals. The humanist bent is furthered by pointing to the uselessness of religion and the worth of sociability as will be shown in Chapter 3 (Humanism in Larkin's Poetry).

Many critics and scholars agree that if the themes might have not changed, Larkin's art and craftsmanship is once more heightened and, technically, *High Windows* is considered as his most elaborate collection. In addition to the use of colloquial language, combined with the more or less easily accepted obscenities

¹ Andrew Swarbrick, *Philip Larkin*, English Association Bookmarks Number 17, University of Leicester. (www.le.ac.uk) < 21 March 2011>

² See Swarbrick, *Out of Reach: The Poetry of Philip Larkin*, (London, 1995), p. 123

³ In October 1966, he wrote to Monica Jones: "Indeed, when I think of being in my *twenties*, or my *thirties*, I can't call up any solid different image, typical & unshakable". (SL 386-387). And in another letter to Norman Iles dated 4 July 1972: "I am glad you feel satisfied with your life (...) when I look back on mine I think it has changed very little (...) To me I seem very much an outsider" (SL 460).

after the Revolution of the 1960s, this collection confirms “Larkin’s mastery over language”.¹ Its “more unified impact”, combined to the consistency and the force of argument, together with his honesty, is another sign of this perfection. Here Larkin qualifies his pessimism and values the worth of man and life by infusing some virtues in his texts as R.B. Shaw says:

The pieces expounding Larkin’s brand of pessimism have become less stagy; it is as if he has fully grown into an attitude which in a younger man had the appearance of being overly willed. I do not like hearing what these new poems have to tell me (as an American, after all, I claim a sunny outlook as a birthright); but I approve them as being more honest on their own terms than several of their precursors. ‘*The Building*’ [about a hospital] and ‘*The Old Fools*’ [about senility] possess a *bitterness more affecting than any Larkin has given voice to before*; they are, after all, the poems of a man in his fifties, and are grounded in knowledgeable apprehension rather than distant intuition(Emphasis mine).²

In this volume Larkin celebrates the social rituals. He also appraises the beauty of nature and mourns its submission to a degradative modernity. “*Wedding Wind*”, “*At Grass*”, “*Here*” capture these responses. He wants the traditions of gathering at shows for example to be “let...always be there” like “something they share/ That breaks ancestrally each year into Regenerate union (“*Show Saturday*”). He appreciates compassion and sympathetic gestures as is shown in “*The Building*” .

¹ R.B. Shaw, “*A Stateside View*”, *The Poetry Nation*, N° 6, 1976, pp. 100-9. (www.poetrymagazines.org.uk.)

2. Ibid.

Section 5: Relevant Criticism

Larkin's poetry has drawn a particular attention on the part of a great number of critics and scholars. As is the case with any great writer, this criticism is not homogeneous. Irreconcilable divergences have emerged from it. Critics agree on some points and disagree on many others. One of the aspects most submitted to debate is his view of life. Many readers insist on "Larkin's confirmed pessimism".¹ Other readers go further and maintain that his poetry is circumscribed in a "rather narrow range of negative attitudes"². This reading assumes that in his work taken as a whole, Larkin "sees life as a bleak, sometimes horrifying business"³ and believes the poet to be "the saddest heart in the post-war supermarket"⁴. John Press, too, speaks of a sadness of "a man who has *grown resigned to the dull ache of existence*"⁵ (emphasis mine) and Geoffrey Thurley of his "central dread of satisfaction"⁶. But it is admitted that there are in his poetry expressions of new possibilities, and this has interested quite an important number of other readers.

Andrew Motion, one of the most known biographers and critics of Larkin, says for instance that the poet "has often been regarded as a hopeless and inflexible pessimist"⁷, but he finds that his "poems are not as narrowly circumscribed as has often been claimed"⁸. Furthermore, there are readers who believe that Larkin's negative outlook on life is nonetheless tempered and accompanied by strong positive statements. For example, while admitting the bleakness of Larkin's poems,

¹ Janice Rossen, "Philip Larkin at Oxford: Chaucer, Langland, and Bruce Montgomery", *Journal of Modern Literature*. Vol., 21, Issue. 2. 1998.

² Ian Hamilton, "Four Conversations: Philip Larkin", *London Magazine*, 4:8 (1964), p. 73. (Quoted in "Sacramentalism in the Poetry of Philip Larkin". [www.montreat.edu]. July 04, 2008.

³ David Timms, *Philip Larkin*, New York: Harper and Row, 1973. (Quoted in W.D. King, "Sacramentalism in the Poetry of Philip Larkin". And in Sissir Kumar Chatterjee, *Philip Larkin: The Poetry that Build Bridges*, New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2006. p. 19. W.D. King, "Sacramentalism in the Poetry of Philip Larkin". [www.montreat.edu]. July 04, 2008.

⁴ Eric Bomberger, *The Art of the Real*, (London, 1977), p. 74. (Quoted in John Bailey, "The Last Romantic: Philip Larkin", *Selected Essays*, John Bailey, ed., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 93. And in Andrew Motion "Philip Larkin and Symbolism", *Philip Larkin*, Stephen Regan (ed.), p. 93)

⁵ John Press, *Rule and Energy: Trends in British Poetry since the Second World War*, (London: Oxford University Press. 1963), p. 100.

⁶ Geoffrey Thurley, *The Ironic Harvest*, (London, 1974), p. 145. (Quoted in Andrew Motion, "Philip Larkin and Symbolism", *Philip Larkin*, ed., Regan, p. 32. And in Richard Palmer, *Such Deliberate Disguises: the Art of Philip Larkin*, London: Continuum, 2008. p. 110.)

⁷ Andrew Motion, "Philip Larkin and Symbolism", *Philip Larkin: Contemporary Critical Essays*, ed. Stephen Regan, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992, p. 32.

⁸ Andrew Motion, "Philip Larkin and Symbolism", in *Philip Larkin: Contemporary Critical Essays*, ed. Stephen Regan, (London, 1997), p. 32.

David Timms suggests that Larkin was someone who showed strong emotions. Comparing “*Wires*” to “*Myxomatosis*”, he notes that the former is “an intellectual apprehension of an emotional concept and no more, but “*Myxomatosis*” is realized emotionally as well as intellectually”¹. Timms highlights Larkin’s compassion to suggest that what some of his bitter poems say is not his proper own voice.² But Larkin was not dominated by emotions because he could ‘control’ the act of writing by the intellect.

There are in addition, among those who temper this charge of pessimism, readers who find that Larkin’s poetry expresses only “*uncertainty* (...) a feeling of *rootlessness*” and that “his mood is never one of despair, and often there is (in his poems) a deep yearning for an escape from futility”³ (emphasis mine). This qualified view attempts a relatively balanced opinion highlighting some qualities of Larkin, like his compassion, which ‘counterbalance his cynicism’⁴. Other readers, like John Bailey, go further and maintain that his sad writings contribute, paradoxically, to bring comfort: “I often read “*Aubade*” or “*The Building*”, and they have an immediate and bracing tonic effect: however perverse the process might seem, they at once raise my spirits”⁵.

Another category of readers defend the perspective chosen by Larkin, i.e., his supposed pessimist outlook. John Press, for example, finds it “more than natural to have poetry such that of Larkin”. He thinks that a poet needs to be faithful to the reality, and shares the opinion of those who do not find fault in the poetry of Larkin because of its “bleak mood”.⁶ But where John Press misses the point is when he

¹ Quoted in Walford Davies, “*An Ordinary Sorrow of Man’s Life*”, *The Sewanee Review*, Vol. 84, No. 3 (Summer, 1976), pp. 523-527.

² To convince his readers that Larkin is an exceptionally compassionate man, Timms tries to show that some of Larkin’s ‘best known, and best poems are dramatic monologues... The mean-spirited poems, like “*A Study of Reading Habits*” are not uttered in propria persona, that Larkin does not really mean what his poems sometimes say. (In Robert Von Hallberg, Untitled Review of David Timm’s *Philip Larkin*, (Barnes & Noble: 1973), *Modern Philology*, Vol. 73, N. 3, Feb. 1976, pp. 325-328.

³ C.B. Cox, “*Philip Larkin*”, *Critical Quarterly* 1 (Spring 1959): 14-17. (Qtd in D.W. King, “*Sacramentalism in the Poetry of Philip Larkin*”, <www.montreat.edu>

⁴ John Press, *Rule and Energy*, (London, 1963), p. 107.

⁵ Quoted in Richard Palmer, *Such Deliberate Disguises: The Art of Philip Larkin*, (London, 2008), p. 82.

⁶ He writes: “To blame Larkin for this bleak wanhope is to misrepresent the nature of poetry. A poet owes complete fidelity to the truth as he perceives it, however dispiriting or shameful it may be. It is a common place that poetry may be born of suffering, degradation, vice, and despair: Larkin has proved that a man who sees life neither tragic nor heroic, but rather as a grey, muddled, unsatisfactory affair can fashion poetry out of the drabest, most compromising material- the boredom, the inadequacy, the pointlessness, the nagging anxiety of suburban life in our day.” (In John Press, *Rule and Energy : Trends in the British Modern Literature*, p. 105).

says that Larkin surrendered to resignation¹. We will see throughout this study that Larkin did not resign. He rather put all his energy in affirming the reality of Man's plight and the necessity to confront objectively his flaws to surpass his miserable situation. Without being nihilist, he could be said to partly share Nietzsche's belief that Man is something to be surpassed. The same line of thought is taken up by Diane Middlebrook who finds in Larkin a kind of authenticity maintaining that "authentic feeling ...is not necessarily uplifting or generous" and that "his range extends to ecstasy as well."²

Calvin Bedient, too, has examined this negative outlook and states that never before had English poetry been so in the cold than with Larkin mourning "a world without generative fire"³, but who is nonetheless able of making you laugh from time o time. Bedient compares this snowman to a clown who has the rueful sense of himself and who invites to complicity with defeat. "Yet where the clown, however little and stepped on, is indefatigably hopeful, Larkin is *unillusioned, with a metaphysical zero in his bones*"⁴ (emphasis mine). For Bedient, Larkin was in line with his time inasmuch as the fears of the contemporary life were concerned. He was the poet his generation needed to express the post-war despair⁵. Bedient notes that Larkin was admired and loved because he found poetry and humour even in sterility and made this bearable. Plain and passive, Larkin domesticated the void, according to Bedient, and "his achievement has been the creation of imaginative bareness, a penetrating confession of poverty"⁶. But if Bedient points to the fact that Larkin does in the world, instead of being done to, ensuring thus a self-affirming act; that he domesticates the void; that he is a nihilist in a way; and that he takes art to be an "assertion of oneself in an indifferent or hostile environment", he fails to see in this an existentialist individual affirming the worth of man and life

¹ Commenting "*Myxomatosis*", he says: The absence of complaint or self pity, like the alertness and muted wit of the writing, cannot hide the fact that this is a poem of utter sadness and exhaustion, the testament of a man who has grown resigned to the dull ache of existence." (*Rule and Energy*, pp. 100-101.)

² Diane Middlebrook, "*Where All the Ladders Start*", *The Hudson Review*, Vol. 46, N°. 4, Winter 1994.

³ Calvin Bedient, *Eight Contemporary Poets*, London: Oxford University Press, 1974. p. 69

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.70.

⁵ This despair was "the withering of the ideal, of romance, of possibility, that characterizes post-post-war thought". (Calvin Bedient, *Eight Contemporary Poets* (London: 1974) p. 71)

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 72

even though he notices that “Larkin sings as the blade comes down”¹. Is there any other positive attitude as singing when the most crucial moment comes? The concepts of pleasure, unhappiness, and threat are here mingled to yield a very complex and paradoxical view of life, which only the existentialist, and thus humanist outlook can encompass. Bedient believes that “Larkin had yet to reconcile the supposed unpleasure of truth with the pleasure of imagination”². His understanding of the concepts of pleasure and unpleasure in Larkin is closely linked to the latter’s life.

Bedient also has recourse to the ‘nature of Man’ to explain Larkin’s dwelling on the tragic. He maintains that Man is inclined to be interested in the tragic side of life and that the strongest ideas in art have always been those negative themes³. Reacting to Bedient’s reading, James Naremore finds that in Larkin’s poetry the “quotidian life is presented with an intense mixture of *regret and resignation* that became Larkin’s special poetic identity”⁴ (emphasis mine). This realization informs a philosophical debate scholars have often neglected. This tension between regret and resignation, the two elements being united to yield the poet’s identity is itself *existentialist*”. But this notion of existentialism in Larkin’s poetry is not any further explored.

Neil Covey on his part links the notions of loneliness, detachment and isolation to the “predicament” of Larkin himself. He explains that the poet considers that the “individual’s consciousness of isolation... (is) a problematic myth for poets who sought some sort of popular appeal and who sought to poetry sympathy for common people”.⁵ Examining these strategies to write for real people (not for the artist) in order to “oppose the myth of the isolated artist”,⁶ Covey remarks that, on the contrary, this reinforces the isolation of the artist because of the ‘superiority’ in which he finds himself due to this attitude. Covey suggests that by “battling the

¹ Ibid

² Ibid., p.74

³ Bedient writes: “In truth, Larkin’s themes belong to that great negative order of ideas that has always proved the most potent in art. We cannot help ourselves: we home to tragedy—optimism in art commonly leaving us deprived of some deeper truth. Nothing is of more initial advantage to a poet than a horizon of clouds”(Ibid.,74)

⁴ James Naremore, “Recent British Poetry”, *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 16, N°. 3, (Summer 1975), pp. 381-385.

⁵ Neil Covey, “Larkin, Distance, and Observation”, *Modern Language Studies*, Vol. 23, N. 3, Summer 1993.

⁶ Ibid,

assumption that poetry had to be difficult”, Larkin succeeded in “creating an image of himself as ordinary”¹ joining thus A. Alvarez who wrote in this respect: “he (Larkin) is just like the man next door – in fact, he probably is the man next door”.² But it can be argued that indeed this is one of the ways Larkin makes himself ‘authentic’: being exceptional by remaining ordinary. His ordinariness lies in his authenticity. Furthermore, Larkin was less interested in his image in society than with art and the view of life in general.

Other readers have tried to find an explanation for Larkin’s negative view of life in his own experiences. Pointing to the contrast of Larkin’s “unhappy life” and the beauty of his poetry, Motion suggests that the poet picked up in his real life the material of his fiction. Considering his love difficulties and the death of his father, he concludes that Larkin, in the late forties, “had found reasons for being unhappy which matched for the first time his instinct for misery”³. However while he admits that Larkin’s poems are not as narrowly circumscribed, he imposes on them a more limited scope of reading by linking them directly and closely to the poet’s life. For this ‘instinct for misery’, if not considered in the philosophical shaping frame, may be misleading. The reason is that, in reality, one cannot maintain so authoritatively that Larkin led a really miserable life. He himself said, on various occasions, that it was his choice to live as he did. Indeed he was endowed with all the prerequisites of a happy life⁴. Were it not for his ‘philosophy’, he would have led an ordinary and ‘satisfying’ life. This philosophy is directly drawn from Man’s plight in the modern world.

For, many critics have been busy finding correspondences between Larkin’s texts and his life. Thus his ‘sexual deceptions’, his ‘social isolation’, his ‘middle class origins’, among other aspects, have been put to contribution to detect reflections of Larkin’s life in his fiction. Because I share the opinion that to “put Larkin’s poems in some kind of immediate personal context leads to a limiting,

¹ Ibid

² Quoted In Covey, “*Larkin, Distance, and Observation*”. pp. 20-21.
And in, Alan sinfield, *Literature, Politics, and culture in postwar Britain*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989, p. 184.

³ Quoted in Neil Covey, “*The New Larkin and his Proper Ground*”, *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 35, N° 3, Autumn, 1994.

⁴ But he chose to live as he did.

even cramped exegesis of the works themselves”¹ , I give wider interest in this study to analysis of the works themselves, with only slight references to the context in which they were written when dealing with Larkin’s supposed deceptions.

This reading which draws parallels between the poems and Larkin’s life is often confronted to the difficulty of establishing any direct link with the personae in the poems and the poet himself. When Larkin insists on “experience”, this does not mean that it forcedly means only what happened to him. His poetry is characterized by ambiguities and an ever-present tension.

Motion’s idea that Larkin was really willing to find reasons for being unhappy is debatable. His unhappiness, our study will show, is a matter of perspective in the scope of a wide philosophical view hinted to through the vocabulary used by these readers but not so clearly and definitely recognized. For, as Diane Middlebrook puts it, we can say that “Larkin reserved poetry for the pursuit of *authentic feeling*”², (emphasis mine). The convergence, here, of the ideas of freedom, choice and action on the one hand as evidenced by the verb ‘reserved’ and that of project leading to shaping an identity (to pursue authentic feelings) on the other hand inform on the existentialist and humanist outlook in Larkin.

Considering the misleading “distortions of biographical criticism”, some readers insist on the distinction between the poet and his personae, though the occurrence of personal experience, to a certain extent, is unavoidable in literature. Stephen Regan and Andrew Swarbrick published, in 1992 and 1995, respectively, two works which attempted to correct these distortions.³ In his book, Swarbrick points to a tension between the aesthete and the philistine, the preoccupation with identity, the distinction between the poet and his personae. He warns against the risks of misinterpretation inherent in the strict biographical reading of Larkin’s poetry and insists on the polyphonic quality of his poems.⁴ For him Larkin is a poet who longs for “infinity and absence, the beauty of somewhere you are not”, and who has

¹ Richard Palmer, “*Philip Larkin: The Poet’s Plight, by James Booth*”, *The Use of English*, Vol. 57, N. 3, Summer 2006, pp. 236-239.

² Diane Middlebrook, *Where All the Ladders start*, *Hudson Review*, Vol. 46, N. 4, Winter 1994, pp. 771-86.

³ Stephen Regan, *Philip Larkin: Contemporary Critical Essays*, London: 1992.

Andrew Swarbrick, *Out of Reach: The Poetry of Philip Larkin*, London: Macmillan, 1995.

⁴ Swarbrick, p. 158

always been haunted by “the pursuits of the thing just out of reach, the being different from yourself”. However these “*existential rather than ideological problems*” (emphasis mine), have not been discussed as such in his work. He writes that the poet “is concerned to construct idiolects...His poems are not ‘confessionals’ because they know the fictiveness of ‘self-revelation’”.¹ Consequently we can argue that rather than revealing himself, Larkin unveils a philosophical view of life by discussing those “existential problems” that inform, in reality, more on “self-realization” as the existentialists would put it.

It might be admitted that Larkin was torn between his desire achieve literary success and his dream of a “successful” relational life. In reality he chose perfection of work and was never fully satisfied. This possibility of choice and this disappointment are relevant to our study as the idea reminds us of the famous Kierkegaard’s “do it or not do it-- you’ll regret both”. Furthermore, the distinction made by Anthony Thwaite between life and work cannot be relied on in interpreting Larkin’s texts because it suggests that ‘work’ is not part of ‘life’, which is of course wrong.

Other readers got interested in the religious aspect of Larkin’s poetry. D. W. King, for instance, explores the idea of sacramentalism in his poems, to conclude that “despite his agnosticism, his frequent focus on sacramental motifs belies the idea that he totally dismisses things spiritual and infers instead a developing if muted affirmation”². King carefully mentions that his argument

is not that Larkin’s use of sacramental motifs demonstrates his latent Christian belief; instead, it is that his essentially sceptical view of life is tempered by sacramental motifs that suggest his ‘durable respect for the Christianity of the past’.³

But this claim that Larkin sought to “temper his scepticism” would reveal untrue if Larkin’s work were examined from an existentialist perspective. As will be shown in Chapter 3, Larkin only adopted a respectful attitude towards what was ‘traditional’ in religion, like the communal life, through rituals, conferring to his works the existentialist characteristic of questioning the ‘sociability’ of Man. Other

¹ Ibid.

² D. W. King, “*Sacramentalism in the Poetry of Philip Larkin*”. < www.montreat.edu >

³ Ibid.

readers have been interested in other aspects considering Larkin a “Tory reactionary expressing nostalgia for lost empire (...) a misogynist or male chauvinist”.¹

So quite a harvest of criticism has been interested in Larkin’s outlook on life, dealing, more or less extensively, with these ideas of pessimism and optimism in his poetry, but all the more failing to find the shaping frame of such a complex attitude. These readings, dealing with optimism and pessimism in Larkin’s poetry, serve here as excerpts representing one of the major trends of criticism of Larkin’s poetry I will rely on in this study. As can be seen, many readers point to the existentialist tenets and themes in Larkin’s poetry, but have not furthered the exploration to examine the link between Humanism and Existentialism. For, if Cox and Bailey point to the existentialist uncertainty and feeling of rootlessness, and to the paradoxical character of Larkin’s poetry, none examines in detail the prevalence of this philosophy in his poetry. Moreover, very few of those who find humane qualities in his writings, have shown interest in exploring the notion of humanism as a whole, and, more precisely, from an Existentialist point of view, in his poetry.

Consequently, these readings need to be completed by looking more profoundly into Larkin’s perception of life. We realize that his works are marked by incessant inner debate and oppositions always giving birth to a particular yearning for change. The ‘pessimism’, ‘scepticism’, ‘ambiguity’, ‘melancholy’, ‘hopelessness’, and ‘disappointment’ as discussed by these critics and others are of a particular interest for my proposal of reading Larkin through existentialist and humanist lenses. As a consequence, more relevant to this study are those readings which explicitly deal with existentialism and humanism in Larkin’s poetry.

In “*Postmodernism and Postcolonialism in Larkin*”,² John Osborne suggests that Larkin, who declared that he opposed modernism, used Existentialism in his poetry to further undermine this movement. In fact, Osborne depicts Existentialist tenets in Larkin’s poetry, like the Sartrean idea of ‘mauvaise foi’ and the existentialist awareness of that the passage of time and inevitability of death. He also sees the

¹ Tom Paulin (Quoted in Brother Anthony (An Sonjae), *Without Metaphysics: The Poetry of Philip Larkin*, hompi.sogang.ac.kr)

² John Osborne, “*Postmodernism and Postcolonialism in Larkin*”, *New Larkins for Old: Critical Essays*, Ed. James Booth, London: Palgrave, 2000. pp. 144-165.

Heideggerian ‘now-and-here’ view of life and the idea that death belittles and equalizes choices in many poems. But he concludes that this contributes to Larkin’s strategy of undermining this “last dice of Modernism”, Existentialism. He argues that the idea of fractured self he depicts in Larkin’s poetry, contradicts the existentialist belief in the individual. But what Osborne takes for a fragmented self is only the polyphonic voice of the one and the same individual undergoing the process of self-realization as will be shown in this study.

On the other hand, there are readers who directly question Larkin’s humanism and insist on his ‘anti-humanist’ characteristics such as isolation, racism, misogyny, and imperialism. Indeed how can one call “Larkin, Jekyll and Hyde-like, the maniac and irresponsible and foul-mouthed Tory, Larkin not the post-war poet of Englishness and successor to Betjeman, but Larkin the notorious prophet of political incorrectness”¹ a humanist? Even from the artistic point of view, this “spiteful writer” is believed to be inconstant.² After the publication of the selected letters and Motion’s biography, Tom Paulin pointed to his prejudiced obscenity to conclude that there had been in fact a “sewer under the national monument Larkin became”.³ This change suddenly brought about a new attitude towards Larkin as under the monument Larkin had been, there seemed to dwell an immoral man whose disdain for humanity fused in forceful words and well crafted verse. Even the noble feeling of love is seen either absent or depreciated in his poetry⁴.

Discussing Larkin’s humanism, Alan Munton questions Ian Hamilton’s belief in the formation of a perceptible other tradition of writing poetry after WWII, humanist in essence, and of which Larkin was part. Pointing to the ‘failures’ of the writers gathered by Hamilton in *The New Review*, Munton writes that these poets were not intelligent and generous enough to be called humanists⁵. We will see that, on the

¹ Fritz-Wilhelm Neumann, “*The Poet of Political Incorrectness: Larkin’s Satirical Stance on the Sexual-Cultural Revolution of the 1960s*” <www.webdoc.gwdg.de> (15 August 2009).

² Fritz-Wilhelm Neumann, “*The Poet of Political Incorrectness: Larkin’s Satirical Stance on the Sexual-Cultural Revolution of the 1960s*” <www.webdoc.gwdg.de> (15 August 2009).

³ Quoted in Neumann, *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ “This tradition is undoubtedly an attempt to establish a way of thinking and feeling for contemporary literature in England; and in doing this it registers a claim to being both humane and intelligent. (...) There is a consistency of outlook among the writers gathered together by Ian Hamilton; and if that outlook is analysed, it appears intelligent, but not intelligent enough; humane, but not humane enough: for its understanding of the world is narrow, and its literary outlook ungenerous” – (Alain Munton, “*A Failed Humanism*”)

contrary, Larkin's poetry is endowed with enough humane qualities so as to be called humanist.

The best criticism of Larkin, I should agree with Covey, would be to acknowledge Larkin "for what he was--a deep-feeling, complicated, contrary, contradictory, not easily pigeonholed artist"¹. This is why while exploring the notions of Existentialism and Humanism in his poetry this study insists on the juxtaposition of the existentialist and humanist ideas in the philosophy and the poetry of Larkin rather than on the supposed lines of influence of any school of thought in particular.

¹Neil Covey, "The New Larkin and His Proper Ground", *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (Autumn 1994), pp. 567-577. p. 568.

CHAPTER 2

EXISTENTIALISM IN LARKIN'S POETRY

When Larkin mixes the absurdity of routine life with Man's (dis)satisfaction and pessimism, like when claiming that

Continuing to live – that is, repeat
A habit formed to get necessities –
It is nearly always *losing*, or going *without*.
It varies.
(“*Continuing to Live*”) (Uncollected, CP 177),

Existentialism in his poetry becomes hard to refute. Such ideas, and other existentialist themes, occur considerably in his three major collections of poetry. This chapter intends to explore this aspect of his verse. Thus the ideas of freedom, choice, and responsibility, as well as his pessimistic outlook, his insistence on isolation and loneliness, and the subsequent anxiety he depicts in relation to the passing of time and the ensuing death will be examined. But, first, let's see what is meant by Existentialism and what its main tenets are.

The *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* defines Existentialism as

a philosophy that emphasizes the uniqueness and isolation of the individual experience in a hostile or indifferent universe, regards human existence as unexplainable, and stresses freedom of choice and responsibility for the consequences of one's acts¹.

But considerable divergences among the existentialists make it difficult to satisfactorily define this philosophy. Existentialism came to prominence in the literature and philosophy of the 1940s and 1950s in Europe under the influence of the French philosopher and writer Jean Paul Sartre. It lays emphasis on the individual experience and the formation of essence through the act of living. One of its major principles is that “existence precedes essence”². For the existentialists, Man is

¹ *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, Fourth Edition, Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000. Updated in 2009. (In www.dictionary.reference.com)

² Sartre explains that this “means that, first of all, man exists, turns up, appears on the scene, and, only afterwards, defines himself”. (In *Existentialism and Human Emotions* (New York : Philosophical Library, 1957) p. 15. It opposes thus the old conceptions of humanity such as Freud's view that Man is guided by a set of values (he has) already internalized.

“thrown” into a Godless universe, but he realizes himself through his free will and actions¹. With this freedom comes responsibility and then anxiety. In a world without God, existence is not predetermined, there are no absolute values, and there are no standards. Man’s behaviour is conducted and regulated by interior drives and norms; there are no morals. Consequently, Existentialism rejects institutions.

The existentialists stress subjectivity and maintain that there is no objective attitude. Sartre elaborated on Descartes’ rationalism, but claimed that reason alone was not enough to understand life. Thus the existentialists give importance to emotions. Far from being irrational and pessimistic, Existentialism is a subjective interpretation of life concerned with existence in its totality. For it, only the individual experience is real. It accepts no generalisation or absolute truth as “every truth and every action implies a human setting and a human subjectivity”².

Existentialism originated in the 19th century. It was perceptible in the writings of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche who reacted against the idealism of Hegel. They started to shape this philosophy by asking questions about ‘being’, laying emphasis on the importance of the individual life. Kierkegaard, who is recognized as the “father of existentialism”³ adopted the religious solution for man’s anxiety. Nietzsche, on the contrary, did not believe in God and rejected religion. Kierkegaard exhorted nonetheless men not to follow the dogmatic religious system and for Nietzsche there is no ideal, no religion, and no God.⁴ For him “Man is the master of the universe”. As a result, there is a theistic branch represented by Kierkegaard, Marcel and Jaspers and an atheistic one including Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty. However the divergences, the belief that existentialism is an approach to life denominates this

¹ Commenting this idea, Steven M. Cahn writes: “Since each of us creates a configuration of possibilities for ourselves in the choices we make in our lives, Sartre can say that we are nothing other than the “ensemble” of our actions over a lifetime (S.M. Cahn (ed.), “Jean Paul Sartre”, Classics of Western Philosophy (Indianapolis: Hackett, 6th ed., 1992, p 1167)

² J.P. Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, p.13

³ In Steven Crowell, “*Existentialism*”, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Aug. 23 2004, revised Oct 11, 2010. www.Stanford.edu . Also in “*Existentialism*”, people.bu.edu.

⁴ Lee Spinks explains that “Nietzsche opposed these movements because he believed that by positing the ideal of a general human nature or the appeal to equal rights, Christian morality, socialism and liberalism represented a triumph of base and slavish nature over the strong and independent spirit. In contrast, Nietzsche’s ‘aristocratic’ or ‘great politics’ argued that the aim of culture and politics was to produce the ‘Overman’, a superior mode of being that knows only affirmation and creates its own values from the superabundance of its power”. (In Lee Spinks, *Friedrich Nietzsche*, New York: Routledge, 2003. p.7.

philosophy. All the existentialists believe that man has to live with the consequences of his beliefs and decisions.

For the atheistic existentialists, because “God is dead” Man feels alone in this world and is anxious¹. He is born with no essence, and he gives himself one through his actions but he is conscious of his finitude and he converts his death into an object of reflection. He is free to choose what to do and it is only through his actions that he can hope to overcome the absurdity and the meaninglessness of life. In this quest for meaning and truth in an absurd universe, man feels he doesn’t have time to have access to this truth. Consequently he gets anxious. In addition, the passage of time brings death and such a prospect adds to his anxiety. In addition, the individual seeks to distance himself from society and his feeling of being alone is aggravated by his consciousness of his finitude.

Atheistic existentialism insists on loneliness, freedom, thought, choice, action and responsibility, the passage of time, death, and anxiety. It furthermore lays emphasis on atheism, agnosticism and humanism as conditions of a meaningful life in a meaningless world. Sartre writes that existentialism is an ideology that makes life possible². Existentialists believe that reason alone cannot explain existence: the emotions are also important.³ How far are these ideas mirrored in the poetry of Philip Larkin, is what we will try to show in the following sections.

¹ Because “If God does not exist, everything is possible” (Dostoyevsky) and because “We are alone, with no excuses...” (Jean Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, p. 23)

² This possibility is a result of the new perspectives the philosophy permits by questioning established beliefs

³ See J. P. Sartre, “*the Desire to be God*”, in *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, pp 60-67

Section 1: Pessimism as an Aspect of Existentialism

Because of its insistence on the bleak aspect of life, Existentialism is accused of being pessimistic. The same tendency is observed in Philip Larkin's poetry, with his extensive handling of modern man's predicament, taking up the existentialist themes. Like Sartre and Camus, he stresses Man's isolation and his paradoxical situations. The idea of pessimism pervades his poetry, and while others insist on his negative view of life, he believes that poetry should be faithful to experience and sees it as "an affair of sanity, of seeing things as they are"¹.

True, pessimism permeates in Larkin's four collections of poetry as well as in his uncollected poems. The mood of his poems is often sad and he generally depicts characters depressed by a wide range of things and events, often apparently very simple (money, work, weddings, sex, and a delayed plane, for instance). The title of his first major collection, *The Less Deceived* (1955), is suggestive enough on this aspect. Larkin was interested in the "less deceived", rather than in the "happier", as though, for him, Man is condemned to be deceived and, accordingly, the difference is only in the degree of deception. Accordingly, he finds sadness and dissatisfaction everywhere: at home ("home is so sad"), in social relation, in nature, in rituals, shows, parties, and even with money:

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

("Money", *HW, CP 152*) (emphasis mine)

This propensity to sadness and pessimism extends to the most banal daily acts. He thus writes a poem about cut grass, pointing to the desperate situation of the end of life and dwelling on death:

Cut grass lies frail:
Brief is the breath
Mown stalks exhale.
Long, long the death...
(*"Cut Grass"*, *HW, CP 153*)

¹ Philip Larkin, "Big Victims", *Required Writing* (London: Faber, 1983) p.197.

Larkin here subtly contrasts the brevity of the breath exhaled by the mown stalks to the long death to insist on the bitterness on the fatal condemnation for all life to cease. This pessimistic bent is more clearly marked in *“Vers de Société”* where he contrasts light with failure and remorse:

Only the young can be alone freely.
The time is shorter now for company,
And sitting by a lamp more often brings
Not peace, but other things.
Beyond the light stand failure and remorse
Whispering *Dear Warlock-Williams: Why, of course –*

(*HW, CP 148*)

This pessimistic outlook stems from the belief that the “unfenced existence” where Man could be happy is “out of reach” (*“Here”*). Mr Bleany spent his whole life in a poor unfurnished room, “till they moved him”, and perhaps with “the dread / That how we live measures our own nature” (*“Mr Bleany”*). In *“Nothing To Be Said”* Larkin is categorical: “Life is slow dying”. Besides, even on a larger scale, the view is not better: for the different nations, the time spent in performing different activities is no more than an “advance / On death” (*TLD, CP 82*).

This pessimism can also be seen in *“Continuing to live”*. In the opening lines of the poem, quoted above, Larkin suggests that Man’s routine life is doomed to be a game where the individual always loses. The loss is general, Larkin believes: it is a “loss of interest, hair, and enterprise”. In addition, this insistence on the routine of daily life is reminiscent of the existentialist writers like Sartre, Camus, and Beckett who insist on this aspect. This very limited scope of perspective seems to be intended

....to confess

On that green evening where our death begins,
Just what it was, is hardly satisfying,
Since it applied only to one man once,
And that one dying.

(*“Continuing to Live”*, Uncollected, *CP 177*)

Another poem where Larkin displays a bleak outlook on life is "*The Life with a Hole in it*". In this hole, amenable to the existentialist nothingness, there resides life as perceived by Larkin:

Life is an immobile, locked,
Three-handed struggle between
Your wants, the world's for you, and (worse)
The unbeatable slow machine
That brings what you'll get.

(Uncollected, CP 187)

"*Dockery and Son*" (TWW, CP 108) is another poem where Larkin displays his pessimistic view and his bleak perspective on life: "Life is first boredom, then fear. / Whether or not we use it, it goes". There is not only the feeling of boredom and fear which reminds us of the existentialist notions of routine, 'nausea' and dread, but also the sentiment of loss, as in Larkin's poetry, there always stands that black cloud at the horizon: death and nothingness.

This idea of embitterment and sadness is further explored in "*Autobiography at an Air Station*". Here, the speaker, embittered by a delayed plane, concludes that one does not even have to smile. There seems to be a kind of exaggeration for so simple an event bringing a sour reaction: "Ought we to smile, / Perhaps make friends? No". The authoritative negation sounds like a definitive verdict as the speaker seems to believe that he has made the wrong choice and it is already late for him to mend anything.

This feeling of having missed something fundamental is also encountered in "*Send no Money*" (TWW, CP 114). Here the speaker regrets the fact that his efforts have not led him to achieve his objective of acquiring knowledge while he sacrificed a lot when his friends enjoyed themselves: "Half life is over now... bent in / By the blows of what happened to happen." "In this way I spent youth," says the speaker. Regret of past life casts shadows of pessimism on days to come.

Larkin displays this pessimistic bent even when dealing with supposedly happy events. While admiring the beauty of the girl in the photographs she displays in her album, and while admitting "I choke on such nutritious images", the speaker ends by being "...left / To mourn (without a chance of consequence)" ("*Lines On a Young Lady's Photograph Album*", (TLD, CP 43-44). And it is this parenthesis that

best expresses his view: if it is normal to mourn, it is nonetheless highly pessimistic to state that nothing can be done. This because Larkin's belief, and certainty is that:

Only one ship is seeking us, a black-
Sailed unfamiliar, towing at her back
A huge and birdless silence. In her wake
No waters breed or break.

(*TLD, CP 50*)

In another poem, "*Myxomatosis*" (*TLD, CP 61*), the speaker gives a sharp blow with his stick to a rabbit so sick that it cannot move, in order not to let it hope recovery that would never come. The speaker, may be Larkin, has no illusion: when the condemnation is real, there is no way out: "You may have thought things would come right again / If you could keep only quite still and wait". The sooner death comes, the better. Meursault in Camus's *L'Etranger* keeps hoping in his prison cell after his condemnation, but this does not lead him to flee the condemnation. He shows an attitude of dignity in front of the threat of death nonetheless..

Dissatisfaction is in addition expressed in "*This Be the Verse*" (*HW, CP 142*). Larkin writes that man transmits misery to man. His personae distrust love, and the speaker in this poem advises his fellowmen not to have children. The ending of this text is as polemical as its beginning: "Man hands on misery to man. / (...) And don't have any kids yourself". Even in marriage, "The women shared / The secret like a happy *funeral*" (emphasis mine). Death comes in here instead of happiness, joy, and celebration. The same pessimistic outlook is encountered in "*Afternoons*" (*TWW, CP 115*) where the ladies described by the speaker, in the recreation ground, have "Before them, the wind (which) / Is ruining their courting places". Furthermore, as "Their beauty has thickened", "something is pushing them / To the side of their own lives". Setting free their children and meeting to discuss does not prevent them from the threat of death. In the speaker's view, they do not enjoy their lives: he just sees them as individuals threatened by the approaching 'annihilation'.

Larkin once said: "Deprivation is to me what daffodils were to Wordsworth" (*RW 47*). This pessimistic claim is nonetheless linked to daffodils. The tension here resides in the confrontation of two opposing principles. If 'deprivation' can be 'daffodils', cannot we say that Larkin's pessimism might be linked to optimism?

Sartre rejected the criticism addressed to Existentialism, and which saw this philosophy as negative, claiming that it was, on the contrary, Humanism. In Larkin, the same line of argument can be taken up to speak about his peculiar optimistic attitudes and gestures in despairing situations. This existentialist binary perception of life is, in addition, built upon the major other existentialist themes. The following sections explore the occurrence of Existentialist tenets in Larkin's poetry.

Section 2: Man in the World: Loneliness and Alienation

Philip Larkin shares the Existentialist emphasis on the individual experience. Nearly all his poems are spoken in the first person singular. The personae are generally individuals telling about their own or someone else's experience. This is achieved through realistic descriptions leading sometimes to conclusions consisting of the speaker's understanding or appreciation of the event(s). The presence of an onlooker delivering his/her comprehension of an event after a close observation and description is, for Larkin, a way of stressing individual understanding. Otherwise, this is done through a narrative made in the first person singular to foreground the speaker's own reminiscence of a past event. Thus the use of the first person singular in his poetry marks this insistence on the individual.

In "*Reasons for Attendance*" (TLD, CP 48), for example, the word "individual" is emphasised through repetition. The onlooker is drawn to the glass by "that lifted, rough-tongued bell/ (Art if you like) whose *individual* sound/ Insists I too Am *individual*" (emphasis mine). This repetition is suggestive of how much important individuality is for Larkin. Further in the poem, the speaker says: "It speaks; I hear; Others may hear as well, // But not for me, nor I for them; and so/ With happiness." This idea that each one has his own convictions highlights individuality. The speaker can decide for himself, he is sure that he hears, but he cannot be as affirmative as this when it comes to telling about the "others (who) may hear as well".

Existentialism emphasises Man's interrelation and interaction with the outside world. By acting, Man forges his own essence and shapes the world that surrounds him. Sartre considers nature not only indifferent but aggressive, Heidegger and Jaspers plead for a communion between man and his environment. For the former, philosophy is the knowledge of being in the world, not only as a being turned to his future, as Kierkegaard defines him. The two existentialist attitudes towards nature can be found in Larkin as his characters are sometimes in harmony with nature, or seek to be in harmony with it, and the relation is sometimes conflictual.

Larkin's characters are often solitary individuals. In "*Spring*" (TLD, CP 66) the lonely speaker describes the communal life of other people with their children enjoying life. The others are in a kind of harmony with nature while the sun lights the speaker "threading his posed-up way across the park". This individual is

alienated both from society and the feeling of happiness. Communality, happiness and fertility are thus contrasted with loneliness and alienation. On the other hand, solitude, this “indigestible sterility” contrasts with the beauty of nature. There is life, joy, multiplicity in spring, but the season profits only for those whose needs are “immodest”. There is the communal life and joy on the one hand, and the alienated speaker’s loneliness on the other hand. He compares his solitude to the “indigestible sterility” contrasting it with the beauty of nature, giving to the text a strong tension characteristic of the existentialist paradox. There is life, joy, multiplicity in spring. However it profits only for those whose visions are very clear and whose needs are “immodest”. Loneliness is here foregrounded in a season of contact, joy, fertility. It is a period “of the seasons the most gratuitous”.

In “*The importance of Elsewhere*” (TWW, CP 105) Loneliness is clearly foregrounded in the first line: “Lonely in Ireland, since it was not home, / Strangeness made sense.” The speaker feels alone and estranged as he is not at home. The language, the streets and the landscapes are new to him and he does not quickly fit. In “*Talking in bed*” (TWW, CP 100), Larkin adds to the idea of loneliness the absurdity of ‘togetherness’. For, although they lie together in bed, the man and his wife are in a kind of isolated togetherness. They are foreign to one another. They cannot even communicate:

Talking in bed ought to be easiest
Lying together there goes back so far
An emblem of two people being honest.

Yet more and more time passes silently.
Outside the wind's incomplete unrest
builds and disperses clouds about the sky.

And dark towns heap up on the horizon.
None of this cares for us. Nothing shows why
At this unique distance from isolation

It becomes still more difficult to find
Words at once true and kind
Or not untrue and not unkind.

The close relationship between the wife and her husband does not prevent the feeling of loneliness. The two are alienated from each other, from society, and from love.

In “*Lines on a Young Lady’s Photograph Album*”, this alienation from society is shown through the disturbance of the quietness of the scene. The speaker is discomforted by those “disquieting chaps who loll / At ease about your earlier days” while he is appreciating the photographs. As a reaction, he estranges them: “Not quite your class, I would say, dear, in the whole”. He is a lonely individual alienated from society who rejects, and thus alienates others in his turn. Similarly, the two horses described in “*At Grass*”, the concluding poem of *TLD (CP 75)*, are no longer in society, in competitions that, “fifteen years ago”, “fabled them”. They are, in addition, together but separate: “one crops grass, and moves about/ The other seeming to look on”. They are old and they have retired. They seem to calmly wait for death. From the Existentialist point of view, it could even be argued that they are going to “die alone”, as Heidegger put it¹.

In his life too, Larkin insisted on the idea of isolation which he found essential. In an interview with *The Observer*, he thus justified his preference for Hull:

I like it (Hull, his town) because it's so far away from everywhere else. On the way to nowhere, as somebody put it. It's in the middle of this lonely country, and beyond the lonely country there's only the sea” (RW 54)

The insistence on the remoteness of the spot, its isolation in the centre of “this lonely country”, the fact that there is nothing beyond it informs this aspect of alienation in his poetry. In “*Reasons for Attendance*” (*TLD, CP 48*), the speaker is alone and alienated from society, from the hall where the young “dancers-- all under twenty-five--/”, Shifting intently, face to flushed face,/ Solemnly on the beat of happiness./”. The speaker is drawn there, but he has a limit: the lighted glass he cannot overpass. The frontier is thin, transparent, but impossible to cross nonetheless. He leans to the glass, watches the scene, but denies being attracted by the “wonderful feel of girls”, “sex”. He is rather drawn, he says, “a moment to the lighted glass/” by “The trumpet’s voice,” “that lifted rough-tongued bell/ (Art, if you like)”.

This idea of alienation is further discussed in “*Deceptions*” (*TLD, CP 67*), the poem immediately following “*Spring*”. When we know the interest Larkin gave to

¹ See Diane Zorn, “*Heidegger’s Philosophy of Death*”, *Akademia*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 1991, pp.10-11. <<http://www.yorku.ca/zorn/publications.html>>

the order of his poems in his collections¹, we can guess that one of the effects intended by this succession is the insistence on loneliness and alienation, respectively. The speaker, who reacts to the words of a raped girl is alienated from the general acceptance of sympathizing with those who are hurt. He is exceptional and seemingly refuses to sympathize with the victim, the raped girl. He is almost alone, or at least among the very rare to think that the real victim here is the rapist. Although he “can taste the grief” of the girl who had been drugged before she was raped, he would not, however, “dare console (her) if (he) could” though he concedes that the “suffering is exact”. He thinks that the girl would be less deceived than the rapist, victim of his desire and the illusion that meeting his sexual desire would make him happy. Furthermore the raped girl is alienated from society. Society does not care for the raped girl as the “bridal London” is preoccupied with other things. Nature is also hostile to the victim: “light ...forbids the scar to heal and drives/ Shame out of hiding”. However the real victim for the speaker is the rapist who while “stumbling up the breathless stair” was may be thinking that it was possible to be happy after the fulfilment of his desire.

In Larkin’s poetry, alienation operates at different levels. For example, in “*Places, Loved ones*”, it is a double exclusion. The speaker is alienated both from nature and society (love) and he is in the impossibility to fit or belong:

No, I have never found
 The place where I could say
 This is my proper ground,
 Here I shall stay;
 Nor met that special one
 Who has an instant claim
 On everything I own
 Down to my name;

(*TLD, CP 46*)

The relation between man and the outside world is multifaceted though. In “*LY LPA*”, the relation of man and nature is symbolised by the girl “clutching a reluctant cat...or lifting a heavy headed rose”. The appreciation of beauty is here associated with natural elements. However there is a kind of oppression on the part

¹ “Larkin thought long and carefully about which poems to publish and in what order; each of his volumes was beautifully and shrewdly shaped” (Katha Pollitt, “*Philip Larkin*”, *Grand street*, Vol. 9, N. 3, (Spring, 1990): 250-260, p. 252.

of the girl who, somehow, forces the cat in her hands. If Larkin introduces disturbances into the poem by referring to those “disquieting chaps who loll/ At ease about your earlier days”, he also grieves at the exclusion: “In the end, surely we cry / Not only at exclusion because it leaves us free to cry”.

However, nature is very often associated with quietness. In many poems, to flee the presence of others, Larkin’s characters make recourse to nature where they try to find the lacking harmony. In “*Wedding Wind*” (TLD, CP 45), for instance, the wind disturbs the couple’s happiness. “The wind blew all my wedding day, and my wedding night was the night of high wind,” says the bride. The wind was high and it blew uninterruptedly on this special day of happiness, as if nature revolted against this association. Ears are not only assaulted by the noise of the wind, but also by the “stable door (...) banging, again and again”. The repetition here echoes that of the banging door and parallels the continuity of the blowing wind. This causes her husband to “go and shut it” leaving her “stupid in candlelight”. Wind has caused her stupidity. She hears in addition the rain falling. Her senses are all disturbed as she can look but sees nothing. She perceives things, but does not realize their true nature: “Seeing my face in the twisted candlestick, yet seeing nothing”. The candlestick is also disturbed by the wind. The next morning, the couple sees a chaotic scene: “all is ravelled under the sun by the wind’s blowing”. The husband is still preoccupied and busy bringing order into his farm. “He has gone to look at the floods”. All she can do is to carry a shipped pail to the chicken-run, set it down and stare”. The wind is still blowing, “hunting through clouds and forests, thrushing / My apron and the hanging clothes”. Despite all this, the woman “was sad that any man or beast that night should lack the happiness I had”. It is noticeable that humanism is given expression in such difficult situations.

When depicting the social relationships, Larkin generally insists on difficulties and highlights disappointments. Very often his personae express their detachment from society. He displays thus a sceptic vision of the human relations. This can be compared to Sartre’s idea that the ‘other’ is a threat, that “Hell is other people” as the ‘other’ represents the annihilation of freedom. This idea can be seen in Larkin’s poems dealing with marriage where this union means dissolution of the self in the other.

Social practices are dismissed as irrelevant in many of Larkin’s poems. He believes that people marry to “stop (their women) getting away” (“*Self’s the*

Man”). Here, marriage is equated with the limitations of liberty it induces: Arnold, the character depicted by the speaker, gives his wife his money so that she could spend it on their kiddies and

When he finishes supper
Planning to have a read at the evening paper
It's *Put a screw in this wall*—
He has no time at all
(“*Self's the Man*”, *TWW*, CP 95)

He also has to ‘wheel’ the children around houses, to paint the hall, write letters to her mother, inviting her to come for the summer. Considering all this, the speaker recognizes: “...no one can deny / That Arnold is less selfish than I.” But he recommends the reader not to go so fast in concluding so emphasizing that “He was out for his own ends / Not just pleasing his friends”.

Even the most “sacred” relation undergoes the attacks of Larkin. “*This Be the Verse*” is more than relevant in this respect:

They fuck you up, your mum and dad.
They may not mean to, but they do.
They fill you with the faults they had
And add some extra, just for you.

But they were fucked up in their turn
By fools in old-style hats and coats,
Who half the time were sippy-stern
And half at one another's throats.

Man hands on misery to man.
It deepens like a coastal shelf.
Get out as early as you can,
And don't have any kids yourself.
(*HW*, CP 129)

This estranged Man finds true meaning to life in the countryside, far from the littered world of industrialization. He longs to this life where “...silence stands / Like heat” and where

...leaves unnoticed thicken,
Hidden weeds flower, neglected waters quicken,
Luminously-peopled air ascends;
(“*Here*”, *TWW*, CP 79)

So, in many of his poems, Larkin describes man alone facing his own destiny. He generally depicts the individual in front of the twentieth century society's dominant ache: loneliness and despair. The Existentialist belief that Man is alone in a godless universe, confronting the problem of his existence, is observable in many of his poems. In these texts, Man tries to understand the reason(s) why he is "thrown into the world". This individual is alienated both from the world (environment) where he does not fit and from society. He tries to relate, but he fails. In addition, these attempts denote the possibility to choose and act.

Section 3: Freedom, Choice and Action

In many texts, Larkin depicts an individual who has to take a decision. The idea of choice is thus subtly introduced as one of the main themes in his poetry. For example, in *"Toads"* (TLD, CP 62), the speaker delivers his soliloquy starting by asking himself: "why should I let the toad work/ squat on my life?" and further in the text gives the answer why he has decided it to be the way it is. In fact the speaker says he has chosen to work while others simply use their wit to gain money. Many people have decided to live on something else than hard work, and this seems to work for them. In spite of being conscious that work has this "sickening poison", he has opted for it. It is his decision to live this way. He realises that it is impossible for him to have "the fame and the girl and the money/ All at one setting", and, accordingly, has limited himself to work and get only what he can afford himself. This question suggests that the speaker believes that he can do otherwise and act to get things changed, forging thus his own self, or, to "build up his own essence," as Sartre would say.

In *"LYLPA"* the young lady chooses and decides to "yield up the album". Apparently, there is no determinism. The long process of reflection and the inner individual deliberation is underlined by the expression "at last". We can understand here that the lady had time to think before she acted. As in this poem, In *"Naturally the Foundation will Bear your Expenses"*, the speaker has the possibility of choice between remaining there to perpetuate a tradition (celebration) and participate with others, or going somewhere else and make his own living.

The same idea is developed in *"Self's the Man"* where the speaker defends his choice by pointing to the motives of Arnold's decision to get married, denying that, by marrying a woman, Arnold is less selfish than him. On the contrary, he finds that there is not a contrast 'generosity-selfishness' just because the one has decided to marry and the other to remain single: "So he and I are the same,/ Only I'm a better hand/ At knowing what I can stand!"

In *"Reasons for Attendance"* the speaker is free and has the choice between going inside where the young people are dancing; or remain alone, outside the hall. He sticks to his beliefs and decides to "stay outside/ Believing this..." It is his choice to stay where he is. In *"No Road"* too, the speaker highlights the idea of choice by referring to the agreement passed between him and his beloved: "we agreed to let the

road between us/ fall to disuse". The idea of choice is equally highlighted in "*Church going*". The speaker waits till he is "sure there is nothing going on" in the church and he goes inside. Though he reflects that the "place was not worth stopping for" he gives a coin. The speaker recognizes that he often stops at churches and ends "like this". In "*Places, Loved Ones*", too, Larkin emphasizes the idea of choice:

To find such seems to prove
You want no choice in where
To build or whom to love
(emphasis mine)

After choice comes action. The two lovers in "*No Road*" (*TLD*, *CP* 56) have bricked up the gates, planted trees to screen themselves from each other. In "*LYLPA*", where the woman yields the album and does what she thinks suitable to make herself beautiful and to have a good picture: "In pigtails, clutching a reluctant cat; / Or furred yourself...or lifting a...". Repeated action is experience, and as the existentialist believe that Man makes his essence through his actions, this experience makes what one is.

In addition, Man has to be responsible for his actions. This notion of existential responsibility linked to choice is encountered "*Self's the Man*" where it is said that, by deciding to get married, Arnold

... was out for his own ends
Not just pleasing his friends;

And if it was such a mistake,
He still did it for his own sake,
Playing his own game.

(*TWW*, *CP* 95)

This idea of choice linked to responsibility is also visible in "*Places, Loved Ones*". The sense of responsibility is, here, so strong that the speaker states his belief that finding a place that could be one's "proper ground", where one can decide to stay, and a person to be irrevocably attached to is a manner of rejecting responsibility and alienating one's freedom:

To find such seems to prove
You want no choice in where
To build, or whom to love;
You ask them to bear
You off irrevocably
So that it's not your fault
Should the town turn dreary
The girl a dolt

Yet, having missed them, you're
Bound, none the less, to act
As if what you settled for
Mashed you, in fact;
And wiser to keep away
From thinking you still might trace
Uncalled-for to this day
Your person, your place.
(TLD, CP 46)

The insistence on the obligation to act is to stress the necessity of the ensuing assuming of one's responsibility towards the consequences of action. The individual needs to act, make mistakes, wrong choices and build up his own self and of course assume his decisions. The persona here is "bound to act", "having missed them" is a choice.

In "*Myxomatosis*" (TLD, CP 61) the speaker decides to give the suffering rabbit a decisive blow to end his ache. He is convinced that there is no way out of this terrible disease and from the futile expectancy and hope of recovery. The speaker, giving place to emotion here rather than to reason, is "glad (he) can't explain his" act. He is just convinced that this is good for the rabbit. As the animal is irrevocably condemned, the sooner it dies the better. However, Larkin is not unaware that choice may also lead to boredom and failure.

In "*To My Wife*"¹, he is Existentialist in his belief in the absurd outcome of choice and action. The choice of marriage has bricked up all the perspectives:

Choice of you shuts up that peacock-fan
The future was, in which temptingly spread
All that elaborative nature can.
Matchless potential! But unlimited
Only so long as I elected nothing;

¹Quoted in Guy Le Gaufey, *Philip Larkin: Curch Going, 64 poèmes Traduits de l'Anglais*, Paris: Solin 1991, p.23 (www.web.me.com: 02 February 2010)

Simple to choose stopped all ways up but one,
And sent the tease-birds in the bushes flapping.
No future now. I and you now, alone.

So for your face I have exchanged all faces,
For your few proprieties bargained the brisk
Baggage, the mask-and-magic-man's regalia.
Now you become my boredom and my failure,
Another way of suffering, a risk
A heavier-than-air hypostasis.

In "Party Politics" (CP 198), one of his last poems, he states that whatever the decision one takes, it is never fully satisfying:

I never remember holding a full drink.
My first look shows the level half-way down.
What next? Ration the rest, and try to think
Of higher things, until mine host comes round?

Some people say, best show an empty glass:
Someone will fill it. Well, I've tried that too.
You may get drunk, or dry half-hours may pass.
It seems to turn on where you are. Or who.

Clearly, freedom, choice, and action result in the individual's essence. Choice and action may lead to something satisfying, but sometimes the result is negative. Yet all this contributes to the formation of the self and the essence. However, it is in "The Daily Things We Do" (1979)¹ that Larkin unambiguously states his existentialist belief that "existence precedes essence" and that "we are the sum-total of our actions":

The daily things we do
For money or for fun
Can disappear like dew
Or harden and live on.
Strange reciprocity:
The circumstance we cause
In time gives rise to us,
Becomes our memory.
(Emphasis mine)

¹ Uncollected poem, quoted in Tatjana Despotovic, "Molly Keane's Good Behaviour and Philip Larkin's Collected Poems: Some Aspects of Poetic Memory", MA Dissertation, University of Pretoria, 2005, p. 62.

And in Chris Steyaert, Bart Van Looy, *Relational Practices, Participative Organizing*, UK Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing Ltd. 2010, p.55.

It follows that the notions of loneliness, alienation, freedom, choice, action and responsibility, based of course on individuality, are all taken up in Larkin's poetry. In many of his poems, Man is free to choose and act to shape his own self. However, the outcome is not always satisfying and positive. Choice leads in certain situations to unwilled results and is accompanied by anxiety, which is another important element in the poetry of Larkin. In his texts, freedom, choice, and responsibility are, with other Existentialist tenets, signposts on the road to "truth". But Man feels he doesn't have time to get to that truth. Consequently he is anxious. This anxiety is aggravated by the consciousness of the passing of time which brings death. Such a prospect adds to this anxiety.

Section 4: Time and Death

4.1. The Passing of Time

Time is given an important part in Philip Larkin's poetry. In his three main collections, as well as in uncollected poems and his poetry before 1945, this theme occurs intensively. Poems like "Love songs in Age", "Days", "MCMXIV", "A Study of Reading Habits", "Ignorance", "Send no Money", "Afternoons", "Arundel Tomb", to list just a few, encapsulate Larkin's interest in and comprehension of time. His handling of this theme ranges from the simple observation of events temporally situated to attempts to understand what time is. He discusses its effects on life as in many of his poems he deals with youth, ageing, and the passage of time and its consequences. Time's flow brings anxiety. This theme is so important for Larkin that he claims:

*This is the first thing
I have understood:
Time is the echo
Of an axe in a wood
(.....)
(emphasis mine)*

Time is diversely perceived though. Sometimes it is depicted as an eroding agent. In the opening poem of *The Less Deceived*, "Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album", the speaker stresses the fading beauty of the girl under the effect of time. He is sad and regrets his incapacity of doing anything capable of preventing the disastrous consequences:

*.....Those flowers, that gate,
These misty parks and motors, lacerate
Simply by being you; you
Contract my heart by looking out of date.
(emphasis mine)*

This erosion causes sadness and empathy as it deteriorates the girl's beauty. Time flows so irrevocably that, the past, as the speaker in "LYLPA" knows, "will not call on us to justify our grief". He is only left to "mourn (her) ...balanced on a bike against a fence". The past is "a past that no one can now share" as, in terms of

prospects, only the future can be “shared”. But, here, it is not known to whom this girl will ‘belong’. The past cannot be visited, thus denying it any real existence, the future is inaccessible. The past is only a memory—through the effects that can be seen on the lady’s face. Thus all those aspects the speaker cherishes “lacerate: simply by being over” and the girl “contracts my heart by looking out of date”. He lives this fading of beauty as exclusion. “We cry/ Not only at exclusion, but/ because it leaves us free to cry”. This erosion is stronger in “*No Road*” where both love and the setting are affected by “time’s eroding agents”:

Leaves drift unswept, perhaps; grass creeps unmown;
No other change.
So clear it stands, so little overgrown,
Walking that way tonight would not seem strange,
And still would be followed. A little longer,
And time would be the stronger,

Drafting a world where no such road will run
From you to me;
(*TLD, CP 56*)

This is existentialist in the sense that man has no control over the passage of time. With more time, she will totally disappear from his life. He knows there will be another life without her. He thinks of that “world where no such a road will run from you to me” and watch it “come up like a cold sun, rewarding others, is my liberty”.

“*Afternoons*” is another poem dealing with time. The title itself is a temporal reference suggesting end and decay. It is the close of the day, of an era announcing the inherent anxiety to such moments. The speaker describes the absurd daily routine of the mothers who have moved from the prosperity of youthful beauty to the routine and deterioration of family life. The threat does not only lie in the uneventful present, but also in the future which would be devoid of anything significant as the women are being pushed to the margin, powerless in front of eroding time: “Their beauty has thickened./ Something is pushing them/ To the side of their own lives”.

This decay succeeding to prosperity brings a sense of melancholy. Because of time, summer fades and the leaves fall in “ones and twos”. Larkin sees in the ladies he describes the same cycle of prosperity, growth and decay. Nature participates to this erosion as the wind is “ruining their courting places” which belong now to another generation of lovers. However, the death of the falling leaves is contrasted

with the “unripe acorns” to suggest the flow and continuity of time. They were young girls some years ago, they have now become old mothers who have lost their beauty and who see their bodies thickening. They are no more important as ‘something’ is pushing them aside, to the margin. This effect of time is also discussed in “*At Grass*”, the next poem. Two old horses are in the shade, cropping grass. They have lost their past glory. No one now cares about them as they did when “two dozen distances sufficed/ To fable them”. In addition, Larkin displays, in his poetry the paradox of time as a preserving agent and as an erodent element at the same time.

In “*LYLPA*”, this appears in what remains good in the lady. For, one photograph holds her “like a heaven”, and she lies “invariably lovely there”. This tension is also visible in “*Arundel Tomb*”. The first line of the third stanza “They would not think to lie so long” contrasts with:

They would not guess how early in
Their supine stationary voyage
The air would change to soundless damage,
Turn the old tenantry away;
How soon succeeding eyes begin
To look, not read. Rigidly they

Persisted, linked, through lengths and breadths
Of time. (...)
(“*An Arundel Tomb*”, *TWW CP* 116-117)

The air changes “early” to “soundless damage”, but the couple is rigidly there, “linked through lengths and breadths of time”.

Yet, the effect of time is not only physical; it is also psychological. The damage it causes both to the body and spirit can be seen in “*Skin*”. The speaker, addressing skin, tries to forward the temporariness of its worth. He knows that skin “must thicken, work loose/ Into an old bag/ Carrying a soiled name”. This produces a psychological effect on the speaker who regrets not having been able to enjoy and his/her beauty:

And pardon me that I
Could find, when you were new,
No brash festivity
To wear you at.

(“*Skin*”, *TLD*, *CP* 73)

“*Days*” is another short poem where Larkin explores the theme of time, which brings death. The topic is set forth with the title itself and then stressed by the first line. The poem is made of two stanzas (a sestet followed by a quartet). It contains two questions, one at the very beginning, answered in the following five lines. The sixth line is another question which the speaker recognizes as unsolvable:

What are days for?
Days are where we live.
They come, they wake us
Time and time over.
They are to be happy in:
Where can we live but days?

Ah, solving that question
Brings the priest and the doctor
In their long coats
Running over the fields.
(“*Days*”, *TWW*, *CP* 98)

Here Larkin asks existentialist questions. He deals with days as temporal units having a spatial dimension since they are “*where* we live” (emphasis mine). The poem foregrounds the existential angst due to the passing of time and the threatening death. To the opening question “What are days for?” the speaker attempts an answer which itself ends with another interrogation tended, paradoxically, to reinforce the affirmation. “Days are where we live,” he says, and three lines further: “Where can we live but days?” Technically, he encompasses his answer, his truth, between two questions in one stanza, and leaves the second question unanswered recognizing its difficulty. Neither religion nor science is able to tell us where we can live other than in days. The priest and the doctor, two symbols associated with death, run over the fields, searching for the answer. Their bewilderment is rendered by their existential estrangement from their milieus: they are so stunned that they no longer search respectively in churches and science, but in the fields. Larkin allows us to see here the monotony of life as days come and wake us again and again and the futility of trying to find meaning in such a meaningless, absurd world. Time passes, death gets nearer each day, interrogations increase and so does anxiety. Here lies the

existentialist aspect of this text which explores the hopelessness and the meaninglessness of our existence.

In Larkin's poetry, time cannot be dissociated from natural elements: space particularly. Days as immaterial element and a measure of time are given a perceptible dimension by associating them to something spatial. This spatiality is encountered in another poem, "Age", where the speaker's "...age fallen away like white swaddling / Floats in the middle distance, becomes / An inhabited cloud".

So, to be effective, time must bear this spatial dimension. When it is "fallen away", it becomes an 'inhabited island', it has no meaning if time should be the space where there is life. In "Days", time is personified; it acts. It is fractured as a unity which becomes thus an agent. There is the existentialist paradox in this poem as days, which are themselves just a time unit, come "Time and time over". This confusion adds to the existentialist predicament Larkin tries to partly elicit by dealing with time. Larkin's handling of the idea of time in his poetry parallels Heidegger's understanding of this concept as elicited by Gray:

We must consider that the present moment is all we ever experience and *inhabit*. The present moment contains the whole richness of the world and the whole potentiality of experience. The past and future are contained in our consciousness in the present, and, in a real sense, only there. The past, the "has been", acts as a restraining weight on our present, the future, the "not yet", as a liberating, releasing force".¹

The parallel between the idea that "days are where we live" ("Days") and Heidegger's "the present is all we ever experience and inhabit" is reinforced by Larkin's insistence on experience and use of simple events of the present to start his poems before he moves to the past or future, or make any generalisation. This way, Larkin unveils this "whole richness of the world". The whole "potentiality of experience is also expressed in Larkin's belief that "days...come (and) wake us/ Time and time over" ("Days"). Heidegger's conception of time can be said to be encapsulated in "Days" and "Triple Time", two poems directly dealing with time, as well as in the poet's overall outlook on experience in its temporal dimension.

¹ J. Glenn Gray, "The Idea of Death in Existentialism", The Journal of Philosophy, Vol. 48, N° 5. March 1, 1951.p.122.

In "*Triple Time*" the temporal dimension is associated with the spatial one and also with the void. As this poem encompasses Larkin's view of time, in its past, present and future dimension, let's quote it at length:

This empty street, this sky to blandness scoured,
This air, a little indistinct with autumn
Like a reflection, constitute the present --
A time traditionally soured,
A time unrecommended by event.

But equally they make up something else:
This is the furthest future childhood saw
Between long houses, under travelling skies,
Heard in contending bells --
An air lambent with adult enterprise,

And on another day will be the past,
A valley cropped by fat neglected chances
That we insensately forbore to fleece.
On this we blame our last
Threadbare perspectives, seasonal decrease.

(*TLD, CP 65*)

There is in this poem the Heideggerian idea that "time is not truly conceived as a smooth passage from a past to a future through a present"¹. This is rendered by the structure of the poem starting with the present, going back to past to say that this present was once future, and at last projecting the present into the future. This to and fro movement opposes, to a certain degree the idea of smooth flow. Another scholar, Lidia Vianu, has attempted to unfold significant meaning in "*Triple Time*" regarding Larkin's conception of time. She rightly points to the overlapping 'eras' and periods in Larkin :

Triple Time is a poem as sharp as a knife. Our present is the dream of future of our childhood and our future is our failed past. The idea is more appealing than the *words* which clothe it. Overdoing toughness and informality, Larkin sometimes sprains his ankle by stepping outside the poem. He returns, however, with a deft line such as 'where my childhood was unspent.' It may sound like e. e. cummings, but it is so loaded with the

¹ J. Glenn Gray, "*The Idea of Death in Existentialism*", *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 48, N° 5. March 1, 1951. pp. 113- 127.

verbal insignificance of the whole poem that it is far stronger. The rarer, the richer¹. (emphasis mine)

Yet what Vianu does not mention is that this “verbal insignificance” is existentialist. The inability of language to really reflect and express the speaker’s feelings or ideas is one of the major themes of Existentialism which is defined as “the philosophical attitude which consists of the *clarification* and the realization of the *significance* of existence as such”² (emphasis mine). Clarification is carried out through language, whatever “superfluous” it might be. Consequently we are once again in front of the paradoxical situation of Existentialism: trying to give meaning to something which does not have a fixed significance.

This association of the temporal and the spatial dimensions brings Larkin’s view of time closer to another existentialist, J. P. Sartre for whom “the past is fixed in the experiential history of a person” because there can be no experience outside these two dimensions, time and space. The fact is that the one is “fixed” in the other. Larkin’s poetry uses the Sartrean belief that the past is experienced, the present is the current reality and the future is the potential of the individual.³

In “*Triple Time*” (TLD, CP 65), time is depicted in concrete elements as the present is all that surrounds us: “This empty street, this sky to blandness scoured,/ This air, a little indistinct with autumn/ Like a reflection, constitute the present”. However, this is just an image. These elements constituting the present are “like a reflection”. For Larkin the present is “traditionally soured” and it is “unrecommended”. However, on the other hand, this present was a future at a given time of the individual. It was even longed for with enthusiasm as the future is a time of dreams and expectations. In this poem, it was once a time of hope for intense adult enterprise. Time has thus moved from an element of hope to disillusion. The reality of the present contradicts the dreams of the past, adding a layer to the individual self-realization.

Time confers specific characteristics to life. Larkin uses the time units to emphasize these differences, pointing thus to its significance. From the shortest

¹ Lidia Vianu, *British Desperadoes at the turn of the millennium*, Bucarest: LiterNet Publishing House, 2005, p. 98.

² A.M. Ritchie, “*Language, Logic, and Existentialism*”, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 10, N°3, Mar., 1950, p. 398.

³ James W. Ellor, “Jean Paul Sartre”, *Encyclopedia of Death and Dying*, www.deathreference.com. (9 Jan. 2011)

significant moment, such as the second of “cows stopped chewing for a second” (*“The Explosion”*) to the “arrogant eternity” of *“Love Again”* through the “three decades” of *“Reference Back”*, Larkin abundantly uses temporal references, “Time and time over”. Expressions such as “All streets *in time* are visited” (*“Ambulances”*, TWW, CP 104); children or women see “A wild white face that overtops / Red stretcher-blankets *momently*”, “And *for a second* get it whole (emptiness?) / So *permanent* and blank and true” occur in almost every poem “emphasis mine”.

Man has a problematic relation with time, because

Truly, *though our element is time*
We're not suited to the long perspectives
Open at each instant of our lives
 They link us to our losses: worse,
 They show us what we have as it once was,
 Blindingly undiminished, just as though
 By acting differently we could have kept it so

(*“Reference Back”*, TWW, CP 111)
 (Emphasis mine)

This paradox of time being “our element” and Man being “not suited to the long perspectives” might be a result of a wrong choice. Man does not fit because he lives the successive furtive moments. These “instants” of decision are influenced by memories of unsatisfactory decisions. There is in these verses the idea of ‘living the present instant’, that very moment when the long perspectives are open. The long perspectives are assimilated to those hopes of the past which would prove only illusionary with the passage of time. These “long perspectives” may also be interpreted as a look on or a recollection of the past happy moments “open at each instant of our lives” and which are “blindingly undiminished” while age has ruined our bodies. Such a perspective is a perspective of loss and death. Memory proves consequently to be very painful.

The past is given a particular interest in Larkin’s poetry. “He appears to be cherishing the past because it is inviolable, because it is paradoxically the only thing which time cannot deface”, John Press says¹. When the present moment is gone, only the effects of time remain. However the past can create a sense of longing in the

¹John Press, *Rule and Energy: Trends in British Poetry since the Second World War* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), p.99

speaker as is seen in “*To the Sea*” (*High Windows*). The speaker's recollection of happy childhood and beautiful scenery are contrasted with the neglected beach of the present, forwarding the regret brought by change. The words “weak”, “cheap” and “rusting” mirror the deterioration of the beach with the speaker’s ageing. The past in Larkin’s poetry is not intended to make us “rediscover the past” , is not nostalgia, but it serves, in my view, to reinforce the experiential aspect of life, the fashioning of the self reminding us of the Sartreian idea of identity: the person is what it did and what it did not. This is why the poet insists on the impossibility to live it again as is shown in “*Lines on a Young Lady’s Photograph Album*”:

Or is it just *the past*? Those flowers, that gate,
These misty parks and motors, lacerate
Simply by being you; you
Contract my heart by looking out of date.

(...)

In short, *a past that no one now can share*,
No matter whose your future; calm and dry,
It holds you like a heaven, and you lie
Unvariably lovely there,
Smaller and clearer as the years go by.

(*TLD, CP 43*) (emphasis mine)

The importance of time in Larkin’s poetry can be seen in his choice of the opening and the closing poems of *The Less Deceived*, “*Lines on a Young Lady’s Photograph Album*” and “*At Grass*” respectively. These two poems show the effects of time on life and the anxiety it causes. Moreover they convey the idea that pretending to be able to know the past of other individuals is futile. There lies here the absurdity of the desire of experiencing something that cannot be achieved.

In “*Send no Money*”, time is given another dimension. It is personified and is supposed to tell the speaker “the truth”, “the way things go”. It speaks its truth and advises the “booming Boy” who did not enjoy his childhood while “All the other lads there / Were itching to have a bash” to

Sit here and watch the hail
Of occurrence clobber life out
To a shape no one sees –

The boy “sat down to wait”, only to realise that

Half life is over now,
And I meet full face on dark mornings
The bestial visor, bent in
By the blows of what happened to happen.
What does it prove? Sod all.
In this way I spent youth,
Tracing the trite untransferable
Truss-advertisement, truth.
(“*Send No Money*”, *TLD*, *CP* 114)

The truss is of no use at the old age, when all the occurrences of life prove “Sod all”. This existentialist ‘leap’ into nothingness is a result of the inexorable flight of time. The passage “bent in/ By the blows of what happened to happen” can be interpreted as a counterargument to the existentialists claim that Man is the master of his destiny. But this effect of “what happened to happen” is qualified by the regret expressed by the speaker at the end of the text. The regret means that he could act otherwise. He is not satisfied to have sat there just to observe things happen, passively. Otherwise, there is regret of not having been active.

There is in Larkin’s poetry the sense that being conscious of Man’s impotency in front of time brings uneasiness. The realization that time keeps eroding one’s body, spirit and even environment, social and natural, causes anxiety. When she rediscovers the songs at an advanced age, the lady in “*Love Songs in Age*” remembers the feelings and hopes those texts triggered in her, but which she could never really achieve. Now, they can no more produce the same sense of love and happiness as the one sensed before:

And the unfailing sense of being young
Spread out like a spring-woken tree, wherein
That hidden freshness, sung,
That certainty of time laid up in store
As when she played them first
(“*Love Songs in Age*”, *TWW*, *CP* 83)

Sensing the lost pleasures of youth is accompanied by the breaking out of love “to show its bright incipience sailing above, / still promising to solve, and satisfy, / And set unchangeably in order.” As a result of all this

To pile them back, to cry,
Was hard, without lamely admitting how
It had not done so then,
And could not now

The effect of the damaging passing time is reinforced here by the insistence on the loneliness of the aged lady by remarking that she is widowed. Her daughter is mentioned for the purpose of highlighting the separation. She is present only to deteriorate the songs. She has no other 'presence' for her widowed, lonely mother. It is curious and paradoxical that such feeling of love and sense of youth occur when the lady is isolated from human company. The poem traces the different periods of life starting with youth, moving to motherhood and then widowhood. This movement suggests the inexorability of the 'flight' of time which would bring the 'rest': death. So, again, as with existentialist authors' works, the passage of time is one of the major preoccupations of the individual. With its passage, Man realizes that the dreams of youth were mere illusions and that he really cannot control it, and its passing brings extinction. Consequently he feels anxious about it.

4. 2. Death: "The coming dark"

Death permeates Larkin's poetry; it is everywhere and presents itself in different forms in many poems. In his texts, it is permanently "just on the edge of vision". Poems like "*The Old Fools*", "*The building*", "*Aubade*", "*Traumerei*", "*Ambulances*", discuss death. From his youth until his last breath, when he told the nurse attending him on his hospital death bed in 1985: "I am going to the inevitable", Larkin was seemingly obsessed by death. In the mid-1940s, in a letter to his friend J. B. Sutton, he wrote:

Life is a queer business. I see it mainly composed of sex, death, and art, perhaps art as an acrobat going round the ring with his left foot on a black horse, death, and his right on sex, a white one"¹

In his biography of Larkin, Motion points to this obsession noting that

¹ In *Selected Letters*, p.125

In some of the poems—“*Afternoons*”, “*Wires*”, “*Wants*”, and “*At Grass*” – he gives the impression of someone death-obsessed, resolutely singular. Elsewhere (...) he is open to moderating influences”¹

In his poetry, this obsession with death runs from his juvenilia texts to his major uncollected poem “*Aubade*” written in 1979, and to “*The Explosion*”, the last poem of his last collection *High Windows*. In the mid-1940s, he was already conscious that

Death is a cloud alone in the sky with the sun.
Our hearts, turning like fish in the green wave,
Grow quiet in its shadow. For *in the word death*
There is nothing to grasp; nothing to catch or claim;
Nothing to adapt the skill of the heart to, skill
In surviving, for death it cannot survive,
*Only resign the irrecoverable keys.*²
(emphasis mine)

Larkin uses the metaphor of the cloud to stress the bleak side of the phenomenon and insist on its ever-‘shadowing’ over Man. He moreover contrasts it with the sun, the symbol, and the source, of life. In fact there are only life and death in a vast ‘void’, nothingness. Larkin insists in addition on Man’s awareness of it and of its mystery and unavoidability. He also introduces the word heart in this verse to highlight the importance of emotions in front of death, and in life in general. Death is thus not only a phenomenon to be approached by reason alone, but also by ‘heart’. The idea of resignation, here, is not in the sense of dismissing life because it is condemned to end, but it is to admit the reality that death, when it comes, cannot be opposed. This poem encapsulates Larkin’s conception of death he would elaborate on in his later works.

In “*The Building*”, the speaker, describing the people in the hospital, states that “All know they are going to die. /Not yet, perhaps not here, but in the end, /And somewhere like this”. The word “all” can be understood to mean humanity as a whole. This idea is made clearer in the subsequent verses:

.....Humans, caught
On ground curiously neutral, homes and names

¹ Motion, *AWL*, p.215

² Quoted in Motion, *AWL*, p.150

Suddenly in abeyance; some are young,
Some old, but most at that vague age that claims
The end of choice, the last of hope; and all

Here to confess that something has gone wrong.
(*"The Building"*, *HW, CP 136*) (emphasis mine)

Here, as in other texts, death is a certainty. This idea is more plainly expressed in *"Aubade"* where the speaker is sure that

Most things may never happen: this one will,
And realisation of it rages out
In furnace-fear when we are caught without
People or drink.

The theme of death is also discussed in *"Ambulances"*, for example, where it is emblemized by the ambulance itself. These vehicles are 'closed like confessionals', offering no possibility of escape. The poem contrasts the "silence" of death and the noise of the "loud noons of the cities" reinforcing thus the idea that when death comes, "silence stands" (*"Here"*). Ambulances give back "none of the glances they absorb", just as does death ignore people looking at it, and scared for it. Here too death comes after time has elapsed: the expression "Light glossy grey", might refer to childhood, youth and old age, respectively. This sequence reinforces the idea of the wholesomeness of death expressed in "All streets in time are visited". Everyone may be the victim, whatever his / her age, and the ambulance might come to rest "at any kerb". Children, men, or ladies may be stricken at any time. The colour "red" signifying blood and the sick person's "wild white face" adds to the gloomy atmosphere of the poem. In the fourth stanza, the poet moves inside the "confessional", the ambulance where the victim gets "Far from the exchange of love to lie (alone) / Unreachable inside a room" and wait for "what is left to come". "We die alone", as the existentialists put it.

Larkin stresses man's consciousness of his finitude and the other effects this awareness causes. The intense occurrence of this theme in his poetry has led some readers to the conclusion that Larkin was obsessed with death. This reading ignores the fact that, philosophically, it was Existentialism that brought again death to the

centre of the debate after the post-Renaissance eclipse.¹ In addition, Larkin's handling of the theme of death is somehow peculiar. For, there is in his poetry more concern with the effect of the thought of death on Man, than with its occurrence or the consequences of its blow. He shares the existentialist and the humanist idea that after death is nothingness. Although they have a permanent apprehension of it, Larkin's speakers do not generally converse with death or challenge and accept it. Their familiarity with the phenomenon is limited to the thought this provokes and the feelings it arises in them. Unlike Keats, for instance, who is "half in love with easeful death," Larkin is scared at the thought of it, never believing that there can be something lovable in it.

Larkin perceives death only as a total extinction; he does not distinguish between tragic and smooth or even 'sweet' death as some pretend. In his texts, prose or verse, death brings about "furnace-fear when we are caught without / People or drink" ("*Aubade*"). This existentialist fear in front of the threat of disappearance originates in the conviction that death is inevitable and after it, for the others, life does not stop nonetheless, though there can be a minority of people who furthermore would be affected by the disappearance as can be seen with the miners' wives in "*The Explosion*" (*HW, CP* 154). Larkin believes that "Death is no different whined at than withstood" ("*Aubade*", *Uncollected CP* 154)). His response to this phenomenon can be said to be underpinned by the existentialist belief that death is the only certainty of Man.

Larkin's fear may seem unreasonable and contrary to the existentialist belief that the state of being dead cannot be experienced. For in Existentialism death is not perceived as a problem. On the contrary, this doctrine sustains that being aware of finitude, helps live fully. This consciousness gives more intensity to our lives as it refuses any form of life after death. Awareness of the reality of death saves Man because it teaches him to appreciate life and project himself in the future. This is the belief that as there is nothing after it, awareness of death is important and necessary for life to have any significance. But Larkin would answer that it isn't the pain of death that he's worried about, but the absence of pain:

¹ See Gray, "*The Idea of Death in Existentialism*", *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 48, N° 5, March 1, 1951, pp. 113- 127.

This is what we fear – no sight, no sound,
No touch or taste or smell, nothing to think with,
Nothing to love or link with,
The anaesthetic from which none come round.....:
(“*Aubade*”)

There is also a consciousness of the paradoxical situation of Man toward death. For it is also certain, in Larkin’s poetry, that Man cannot admit his extinction: “... what we know, / Have always known, know that we can't escape, / Yet can't accept” (“*Aubade*”). This paradoxical understanding gives Larkin’s poetry its strength and its existentialist bent. Death is ultimately inevitable. He depicts it always advancing, each day coming nearer, but without enough insight into it. It seems like an inert phenomenon. Contrary to many malicious deceptions, death always blows at the end. Whatever the attitude of the individual, nothing changes in the result. However, being heroic does not prevent death because “Courage is no good” (“*Aubade*”).

However Philip Larkin was interested in this “overall scheme”: he wrote about the death of his father in “*An April Sunday Brings the Snow*”, but beyond the effect of this particular event, the interest goes to the whole phenomenon of death in his posterior, and even some previous texts. In his poetry he did not get much interested in particular deaths or disappearance of given persons. But he preferred to deal with death from a general point of view to insist on humankind’s dread, disappointment, and loss. He generally limits himself to displaying his speaker’s impressions while thinking about death as a part of life, its end. These ‘epiphanies’ emerging from brief experiences captured in poems, are thus faithful to his belief that poetry needs to be written in order to preserve an experience.¹

Getting up at four in the morning, the speaker of “*Aubade*” stares into the saddening dark, and while waiting for the light of the day he sees

... what's really always there:
Unresting death, a whole day nearer now,
Making all thought impossible but how
And where and when I shall myself die.
Arid interrogation: yet the dread
Of dying, and being dead,
Flashes afresh to hold and horrify.

¹ He wrote: “The impulse to *preserve* lies at the bottom of all art” (RW 79).

Death comes each day closer and inhibits Man's ability to think of anything else than his 'extinction'. The speaker here insist on the futility of trying to know where and when one would die foregrounding the horrifying 'dread' of dying and being dead. This fear blocks the mind because of

...the total emptiness for ever,
The sure extinction that we travel to
And shall be lost in always. Not to be here,
Not to be anywhere,
And soon; nothing more terrible, nothing more true.

The thought of death brings fear and anxiety. However, all the existentialists do not share the same perception of death. While both Sartre and Heidegger, for instance, insist on finitude and plead for living an authentic life, they view death differently. For Heidegger the relation with mortality leads to anxiety which brings about three different responses: a feeling of fallen state that allows us to avoid this anxiety, a flight from death anxiety, or an embracing of this anxiety. He explains that the latter option leads to a greater authenticity in life as it is the awareness of mortality that makes things matter in life.¹ Larkin did not depict in his poetry a 'fallen humanity'; neither did he get interested in the flight from death-anxiety. On the contrary, he all the way described people living with this anxiety. He thus was closer to what Heidegger calls an 'authentic life' than to the despaired pessimists. In "*Aubade*" we can observe that light slowly strengthens, in the speaker's own words, only when he begins to accept death. The existentialist choice here is between dying while being afraid, and consequently with no peace or accept death and go peacefully while life still goes on. This approach to death is Heideggerian in the sense that it gives possibility to move from anxiety to 'peace' and authenticity. Larkin was interested in the "awareness of death and the problems posed by this awareness" which was one of the major preoccupations of the Renaissance writers (Gray 113) and shared the 20th century, Karl Jaspers and Martin Heidegger idea that "a proper understanding of,

¹ For Heidegger, the relation with mortality leads to anxiety which brings about three different responses: a feeling of fallen state that allows us to avoid this anxiety, a flight of death anxiety, or an embracing of this anxiety. For him this latter option leads to a greater authenticity in life as it is the awareness of mortality that makes things matter in life. (See Gray, *The Idea of Death in Existentialism*)

and right attitude toward death, one's death, is not only a *sine qua non* of genuine experience, but also of gaining any illumination about the nature of the world".¹

In addition, he did not believe in the religious reassurance that after death there was an afterlife. He denounced the religious belief in any form of life after death. Moreover he finds rationalizing upon this phenomenon worthless. For those who wonder how does it happen that Man fears something he cannot see, and he has never experienced the speaker in "*Aubade*" retorts:

...this is what we fear – no sight, no sound,
No touch or taste or smell, nothing to think with,
Nothing to love or link with,
The anaesthetic from which none come round.

The speaker goes further in his argument to state that

...Courage is no good:
It means not scaring others. Being brave
Lets no one off the grave.
Death is no different whined at than withstood.

Like the atheist existentialists, Larkin, believes that religion is of no use in front of death. It neither helps alleviate our suffering and fear, nor is faithful in promising an eternal life after this 'transition'. The poet insists, in this poem, that this

.... is a special way of being afraid
No trick dispels. Religion used to try,
That vast moth-eaten musical brocade
Created to pretend we never die,
And specious stuff that says *No rational being*
Can fear a thing it will not feel, not seeing

("*Aubade*", CP 190-191, Italics in the text)

Religion tries to 'alleviate' our fears through promises that death is just a passage to another life. These promises are 'moth-eaten', as the poet writes to underline the effect of time. The fear of death expressed in this poem is, in part, due to the lack of faith in another life. Larkin dismantles here the belief in the comfort offered by religion through the belief in eternal life after death which occurs in poetry again and

¹ J. Glenn Gray, *The Idea of Death in Existentialism*, The journal of philosophy, Vol. 48, N 5, 1951, pp.113-127, p. 114.

again. Larkin does not agree with those who believe that there is no reason to fear death and rejects the belief that death is a “happy ending” of a step to leap in eternity. On the contrary, he creates, in his poems dealing with death, such as “*Aubade*”, a whole climate of nothingness. The diction used and the ideas developed inform his belief that after death there is only void, nothingness. Otherwise, Larkin speaks of death as an end in the process of life and does not believe in the religious promise of eternity. This can be interpreted as a belief that death is an end of “experience”. It never appears to be a continuation of life. He thus gets closer to the atheistic existentialist belief that as there is no God, there is no after-life.

Death serves in life, however. If “*The Mower*” is less gloomy than the other poems dealing with this theme, it is nonetheless an additional proof that Larkin sees death as the end of all experience. As usual, Larkin makes use of an uneven experience to meditate on death and life. The speaker tells how he came to kill a hedgehog while using his mower to cut grass in his garden one morning, he suddenly “found/ A hedgehog jammed up against the blades,/ Killed”. He feels guilty for having “mauled its unobtrusive world” and mourns at the idea that burying this animal he had seen and fed before was no help as “Next morning (he) got up and it did not.” Death leaves an impression of absence: “The first day after a death, the new absence/ Is always the same;” and Larkin draws here the conclusion that “...we should be careful/ Of each other, we should be kind/ While there is still time” (CP, 194).

We can see that in his poems, Larkin does not deal with the “after-death”. There is really nothing after it. When he does, it is just to mean that after death, is total darkness. His texts deal generally with the stress provoked by the expectancy of death. Only in “*Ambulances*” does he go closer to the act of dying. In another poem he makes quite an exception and delivers an opinion which runs contrary to what his ideas about death and religion had been: “*The Explosion*”. Here he transcends the act of dying to permit the dead miners’ widows to see their deceased husband living as ever and showing them the eggs they collected before the accident “unbroken” despite the terrible violence of the explosion in the mine.

Consequently, it can be argued that there is duplicity in Larkin’s attitude towards death. In fact it is not death that he is more concerned with, but life. He uses death as a disguise for a more optimistic expression. This can be clearly seen in his rhetorical questions aimed rather to insist on his belief in “*At the chiming of Light Upon Sleep*”

Have I been wrong, to think *the breath*
That sharpens life is life itself, not death?
Never to see, if death were killed,
No desperation, perpetually unfulfilled,
Would ever go fracturing down in ecstasy?¹

If death “were killed”, life would have been affirmed and consolidated through the subsequent disappearance of desperation. Here lies Larkin’s adherence to the existentialist belief that Man has to ruminate his death to better perceive life. He thus embraces the existentialist idea that death is extinction. He generally depicts awareness of death and the ensuing fear of it. In “*Aubade*”, the speaker assimilates the “soundless dark” to the hollowness of the prospect of death itself. However when the sunlight suddenly fills the room, bringing the ‘truth’ that death can neither be escaped, nor accepted, and the speaker is drawn to seek refuge in the daily chores of life. It is only this routine that helps him avoid forgetting death for some time to concentrate on life. In this sense, Larkin’s “obsession” with death is in line with Heidegger’s idea that “life is essentially being-toward-death”, “the view that an authentic mode of life is possible only for a person who ‘resolutely confronts death’”² If Man’s thought goes so consistently to death, it is partly because of the absurdity of life.

¹ An uncollected poem written in 1946 while he was at the library of the University College of Leicester. (Quoted in Motion, *AWL*, pp. 153-154)

² Quoted in John Donnelly: *Language, Metaphysics and Death*, p43

Section 5: Anxiety

The emphasis on the existentialist belief that Man was concerned with finding meaning in a godless world coincided with the ruin and horror caused by the wars of the first half of the twentieth century. The “death of God” meant an absence of absolute standards and the morally right and wrong became an individual affair. In existentialism, this feeling of responsibility, resulting from the belief that Man alone acts and chooses his standards to give meaning to his life, gives rise to an emotional reaction called “anxiety”. In Larkin’s poetry, there is anxiety of man in common places, anxiety of solitude in the modern world, anxiety because of lack of money, and anxiety in being conscious of one’s inevitable death, for instance. Furthermore, the fact of being conscious of the unclear and ambiguous nature of life is stressing. It can be added to another revelation of the being: everything is relative and linked to the circumstances despite the useless attempts to found values and draw conclusions based on reason and morality in order to avoid the existential angst. This anxiety is inevitable.

This anxiety sometimes stems from Man’s need to choose. For, choice implies responsibility through assuming the consequences. The difficulty of choosing is inherent to the belief that whatever the option, there follows regret. Choice brings anxiety. Larkin also links this anxiety to the ‘helplessness’ of fundamental emotions like love. Because of the helplessness of reason and emotions, Man finds himself trapped in anxiety. In “*Talking in Bed*”, for instance, the supposed perfect agreement between the two lovers is contradicted by the impossibility of communication:

Talking in bed ought to be easiest
Lying together there goes back so far
An emblem of two people being honest.

Yet more and more time passes silently.
(.....)

....Nothing shows why
At this unique distance from isolation

It becomes still more difficult to find
Words at once true and kind,
Or not untrue and not unkind.

Here, as in other instances in other poems, anxiety is also linguistic. It is related to the difficulty to find words, to choose the most appropriate vocabulary to convey the meaning intended. In addition, this need for accurate words is another aspect of the quest for meaning through choice and action.

In Larkin's poetry, the existential anxiety is sometimes an essential drive to action. This is mainly epitomized by the anxiety of Man conscious of his limits, mainly ignorance, uncertainty, and death. There is, above all, an anxiety which derives from Man being suddenly conscious of the fact that his life and his actions are meaningless and feeling compelled to "Sense this nothingness that lies just under all we do" (*"Ambulances"*). This existentialist anxiety can be felt, for example, in the indefinite expectancy of *"Next, please"*. Larkin evokes the disappointment of man's expectancies. Expectancy is a bad habit, but we "are always too eager for the future". Here, expectancy is symbolised as a ship with golden tits on the figurehead. This vein of deception is also visible in *"Going"* where the evening where "There is an evening coming in/ (...) That lights no lamps". This evening seems "silken at the distance", but "It brings no comfort" when it comes nearer. On the contrary, it symbolizes death introduced in the poem through the questions: "What is under my hands,/ That I cannot feel? // What loads my hands down?" (CP 51)

There is in addition in Larkin's poetry the literary anxiety: throughout his life, he was preoccupied by his literary career. He is believed to have sacrificed private life for artistic production. In letters to friends and elsewhere, he spoke abundantly about his desire to write well and the difficulties he encountered. In *"The Literary World"*¹, he compares his anxiety due to having been blocked and worried about not being able to write, he writes:

Finally after five months of my life during which I could write nothing that would have satisfied me, and for which no power will compensate me...

My dear Kafka,
When you've had five years of it, not five months,
Five years of an irresistible force meeting an
Immoveable object right in your belly,
Then you'll know about depression.

¹ Quoted in Guy le Gaufey, *64 poèmes traduits*, p17

The main anxiety however is that related to the man's being suddenly conscious of the fact that his life and his actions are meaningless. This anxiety leads sometimes to the feeling of 'nausea'. There is also 'nausea' in front of some kind of behaviour in academic circles. Larkin denounced "subsidising poetry"¹, and art in general, and condemned such practices as making a living from travelling from a place to place to give lectures and be paid for this. He satirized this practice in "*Naturally the Foundation Will Bear Your Expenses*". The speaker in this poem travels by plane "One dark November day / ...To the sunshine of Bombay" pondering "...pages Berkeley / Not three weeks since had heard". He had been made late to the airport by "Crowds, colourless and careworn" celebrating a national event, but it was not until he had been airborne that he could

(...) recall the date –
That day when Queen and Minister
And Band of Guards and all
Still act their solemn-sinister
Wreath-rubbish in Whitehall
(TWW, CP84)

The poem can be read as a denunciation of such useless practices of celebrations and as an opposition to those supposed academics who consider themselves above such patriotic questions. The speaker, who recalls that these "mawkish nursery games" "used to make (him) throw up", wonders: "O when will England grow up?" But he seems indifferent to this as he is certain that he, himself, has grown mature:

-But I outsoar the Thames,
And dwindle off down Auster
To greet Profesor Lal
(He once met Morgan Forster),
My contact and my pal.
(LD, 13)

So, we can say that Larkin dealt exactly in the same way with the above-discussed elements as the existentialist philosophers presented them and as the existentialist authors handled them. There is in his poetry the belief that "existence precedes essence" and that man is free to choose and act in order to shape his own destiny.

¹ See *Required Writing*, pp. 87-92.

This sense of freedom makes him feel responsible and as a consequence he feels anxious. His insistence on what is 'negative' in life can be said to obey the belief that to be an existentialist "is, ultimately, to join with Camus's Sisyphus in a tragic acceptance of the limitations of existence while exulting in each affirmative breath of life, in each push of the stone up the mountain".¹ And this is also to be a humanist as understood by Sartre and others who believe that Man's predicament should be debated to have a better perspective on life in general. There is in his poetry the Sartrean belief that "what man needs is to find himself again and to understand that nothing can save him from himself"².

¹ George Cotkin, *Existential America*, Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2003,p3.

²J.P. Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions*.

CHAPTER 3

HUMANISM IN LARKIN'S POETRY

In the 1920s, when Philip Larkin was born, Humanism still continued to fuel literary production, and four decades later, it receded in favour of other forms of criticism and literary theory. From the late 1920s to the mid-1940s, when he attended school and university, the humanist reading of literature was revived and it dominated the literary theory spheres under the impulse of the New Humanists. Between the 1940s and the 1980s, other literary and theoretical movements appeared, like structuralism and post structuralism. In 1985, when Larkin died, the “universality” of the literary works advocated during the first half of the 20th century was being questioned, with the postmodernists refuting any global and permanent truth. How did Larkin interact with all these changes is what we are going to elicit in this chapter, by exploring the occurrence of the following major humanist principles in his work¹: the worth of life and faith in the individual; freedom of Man to act and shape his destiny though he is conditioned by his past; the permanent questioning of assumptions and established beliefs; the rejection of supernatural forces and religion, and disbelief in life after death; personal satisfaction and individual self-development within communal life; the importance of aesthetic experience and belief in the value of art as reflection / production of beauty.

This study discusses Humanism in Larkin not as “cultural and intellectual movement of the Renaissance that emphasized secular concerns as a result of the rediscovery and study of the literature, art, and civilization of ancient Greece and Rome”, but as a “system of thought that rejects religious beliefs and centers on humans and their values, capacities, and worth”.²

¹ As described by Corliss Lamont, in *The Philosophy of Humanism.*, Amherst, New York: Humanist Press, 1997.

² *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, Fourth Edition, Houghton Mifflin Company. Updated in 2009. (in thefreedictionary.com)

At the end of WWII, traditional Humanism¹ was discredited as neither reason nor culture could avert barbarity, and because technology, as a result of the humanist quest for knowledge and understanding, proved to be as destructive as beneficial for humankind. This failure of the humanist values and the Enlightenment ideals contributed to contradict the optimism of the nineteenth century and became a major obstacle for classical humanism. Nazism led to genocides and death camps while the liberal and humanist forces proved incapable of opposing its project of destruction. Consequently, several intellectuals felt that Humanism could no longer be a leading force. Heidegger for example, in "*Letter on Humanism*"² wrote that the idea of man as subject had to be abandoned because Man had been objectified by the fallacious promise of the certainty of science. This problematic concern for Man's fate is also encountered in Larkin's poetry.

¹ Edward Cheney says that Humanism "may be the reasonable balance of life that the early humanists discovered in the Greeks; it may be merely the study of the humanities or polite letters; it may be the freedom from religiosity and the vivid interest in all sides of life of a Queen Elizabeth or a Benjamin Franklin; it may be the responsiveness to all human passions of a Shakespeare or a Goethe; or it may be a philosophy of which man is the center and sanction. It is in the last sense, elusive as it is, that Humanism has had perhaps its greatest significance since the sixteenth century" (Qtd in Corliss Lamont, *The Philosophy of Humanism*, p13).

²Written to John Baufret in 1949, in a reaction to Sartre.

See full text in Lawrence E. Cahoone (ed.), *From modernism to postmodernism: An Anthology*, (second edition) Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2003. (first published in 1996), pp, 174-194.

Section 1: The Humanism of Existentialism

The intersection between Larkin and Existentialism, explored in the previous chapter, can be further demonstrated through the similarity of the charges and accusations levelled against both Larkin and this philosophy. It can also be proved by the sameness of the counterarguments advanced by Sartre and his followers and which can be found in Larkin's poetry. When, in 1945, Sartre declared himself a humanist¹, he was disapproved. For such a statement was thought to be in opposition with his ideas as revealed by the content of *Nausea*². Sartre's bleak outlook on life, which he saw as lack, nothingness, and a void, a "hole... originally presented as nothingness 'to be filled' with my own flesh"³ could not easily be believed to be humanistic. But to the charges of "hopeless pessimism"; "desperate quietism"; "contemplative bourgeois philosophy, just observing", forcing Man into resignation; encouragement of "individualistic isolation" neglecting Man's social, gregarious and solidary character⁴, Sartre answered that Existentialism was Humanism⁵. To the charge of negativity, he replied that discussing the dark aspects life, noting the less flattering sides of human existence should not be confused with a deliberate degradation of humanity. For him, by dispelling Man's illusions and unveiling his dark reality, Existentialism does not denigrate humankind. Inasmuch as isolation and permissiveness are concerned, he explained that Existentialism perceived Man's creation of his own subjectivity within the social relations, and not as in isolation against his environment.⁶ He rejected the accusation of quietism, explaining that existentialism was a philosophy of action and engagement.⁷

Strikingly enough, these accusations are frequent in the readings of Larkin's poetry. As has been shown in the literature review, words such as 'desperate', 'pessimism', 'negativity', 'bleak', 'sad', 'isolation', 'individualistic', 'contemplating', 'inaction' are often encountered in the studies dealing with his poetry. Indeed in the same way as it was doubted whether a philosophy giving rise to

¹ Through his essay "*Existentialism is Humanism*".

² As this claim seemed in exact opposition to the 'anti-humanist discourse and ideas' developed in this novel

³ J.P.Satre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, p. 84

⁴ See Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, p.9

⁵ See "*Existentialism is a Humanism*", in *Existentialism and Human Emotions*.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 34-35.

such consequences could raise claim to humanism, Larkin's supposed humanism has been doubted and refuted.

In fact, some readers of Larkin's poetry categorically reject his "positive side" and find him exclusively negative, refusing to see humanism in his work.¹ For, Larkin, too saw "*(The) life with a hole in it*";² (emphasis mine). As we have seen previously, he is accused of being hopeless and pessimistic, as well as of championing contemplation and resignation. The attitude of a bourgeois observing the world is often depicted in his poems. Indeed from the outset, some poems reflect these charges.

We have seen that pessimism pervades Larkin's poetry. For example, in many instances he unfolds the belief that there is not any positive output in expectation. As if Man has always been disappointed by what comes out of his desire, he writes, in "*Next, Please*": "Always too eager for the future, we / Pick up *bad habits of expectancy*" (emphasis mine). But the "Sparkling armada of promises" is always very slow and the result is, inevitably, disappointment as these 'promises' never come to fruition. On the contrary, the 'truth' is that

Only one ship is seeking us, a black-
Sailed unfamiliar, towing at her back
A huge and birdless silence. In her wake
No waters breed or break
(*"Next, Please"*, TLD, CP 50)

This is similar to the "silken" evening the speaker sees at the distance in "*Going*" (TLD, CP 51), but which "When it is drawn up over the knees and breast./ It brings no comfort". Worse, it brings "What is under my hands, / That I cannot feel...// (and) loads my hands down": death.

Quietism and resignation can be seen, for instance, in "the wish to be alone" and the "desire of oblivion" in "*Wants*" (TLD, CP 52). Besides, Larkin's use of onlookers observing and telling what they see may be interpreted as a preference for isolation and a refusal to be involved. Although there are in his poetry passages that belie the fundamental existentialist beliefs like freedom and choice as when he writes about the mothers (in "*Afternoons*") that "Something is pushing them/ To the side

¹ In addition to pessimism and negativism in general, Lisa Jardine and Fritz-Wilhelm Neumann, for example, accuse him of racism, misogyny and political incorrectness.

² This is a title of an uncollected poem (See CP, p. 187).

of” or “...sense the solving emptiness/ That lies just under all we do” (in “*Ambulances*”), his existentialism and humanism cannot be easily denied. For, on the other hand, there is enough evidence that this “pessimism” is often transcended for something good.

Larkin repeatedly declared that he found inspiration in the difficulties of life: “deprivation is for me what daffodils were for Wordsworth”, “happiness writes white”, did he maintain (*RW*, 47). He believed that sadness, more than happiness, was a considerable source for artistic works, beauty. Thus beyond these ‘negative’ aspects, positive elements can be unfolded. For instance, beyond the apparent passivity, there is in fact, action and involvement in Larkin. Instead of passivity and resignation the individual is free to choose and act. Additional examples to those mentioned in the previous chapter can be found in other poems. In “*Wedding wind*”, the newly married woman describes the turmoil of her wedding, caused by the bad weather

:

The wind blew all my wedding-day,
And my wedding-night was the night of the high wind;
And a stable door was banging, again and again,
That *he must go and shut it, leaving me*
Stupid in candlelight, hearing rain,
Seeing my face in the twisted candlestick,
Yet seeing nothing. (...)

Now in the day
All's ravelled under the sun by the wind's blowing.
He has gone to look at the floods, and I
Carry a chipped pail to the chicken-run,
Set it down, and stare. All is the wind
Hunting through clouds and forests, thrashing
My apron and the hanging cloths on the line.

(*TLD*, *CP* 45, emphasis mine)

Here the couple does not remain still, inactive. The man goes to shut the door, leaving his wife alone. Similarly, the next morning, they go out to see what happened and mend things. The bride also participates in the action. There is also action in “*To the Sea*” (*HW*, *CP* 121) where the speaker steps “over the wall that divides/ Road from concrete walk above the shore”. The speaker of the poem tells us that when he was a child too he “searched the sand for Famous Cricketers”. Actions generally stem from the choice the speakers or other characters have. For example, “*The Dancer*” (*TNS*, *CP* 19) and “*How to Sleep?*” point to the possibility of choice. In the

latter, the speaker expresses this need to decide as regards the position in which to sleep:

Child in the womb,
Or saint on a tomb—
Which way shall I lie
To fall asleep?

(Qtd in Le Gaufrey, P16)

In “*The Dancer*”, questions about the way to act are asked in the epigraph:

Butterfly
Or falling leaf,
Which ought I to imitate
In my dancing?
(TNS, CP 19)

This shows that Man is, at least to a certain extent, free to choose and act, as has been shown in the previous chapter. Larkin’s belief in the importance of action can be seen in another poem dating back to 1946: “*And the Wave Sings Because It Is Moving*” (hereafter “*The Wave*”) where he writes: “And the wave sings because it is moving; / Caught in its clear side, we also sing”¹. This idea that songs, as the man’s realization through aesthetic creativity, can arise from action and movement intersects with the humanists’ belief that through artistic activity, man contributes to defining his own nature. We will see later that Larkin holds artistic creativity very high in the scale of the ‘values’ he wanted to be prevalent in Man.

Moreover, Larkin’s personae do not only observe the world or act alone. Their action is sometimes immersion in society to make new relationships and give (or find) meaning to their life. “*Whitsun Weddings*” starts with contemplation and moves to the involvement of the speaker in the communal life of the newly wed couples. The need to get involved in what is going on is expressed in the attitude of the speaker who tells us: “At first, I didn’t notice what a noise/ The wedding made”. He consequently carried on his reading. But, he is ‘struck’ and “leant/ More promptly out next time, more curiously,/ And saw it all again in different terms”. This leaning further out of his train window marks an act of participation and deliberate

¹ Quoted in Guy Le Gaufey, *Philip Larkin: Curch Going, 64 poèmes traduits de l’Anglais*.

involvement in what is going on in the stations the train stops at and where he sees newly wedded couples. This involvement is further claimed through the change in the pronoun used in the poem. The initial 'I' is transformed into first person plural in the fifth stanza. Larkin praises thus a highly humanist act, viz., getting in close contact to permit the human species to perpetuate itself as this involvement, as well as the poem itself, ends with a "sense of falling, like an arrow-shower/ Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain". This choice is an expression of a highly humanist view of life embodied in the desire to be in contact, to love, be loved and make new relations. The sense of resignation is only irrevocably depicted inasmuch as death is concerned as he writes, in "*And the Wave Sings Because It Is Moving*", that in the word 'death' there is "Nothing to adapt the skill of the heart to, skill/ In surviving, for death it cannot survive,/ Only resign the irrecoverable keys". Besides, even the apparently negative attitudes bear a positive aspect. For example, the "Get out (of marriage) as early as you can,/ And don't have any kids yourself" of "*This Be The Verse*" is not intended to make one stand against love and human relations in general, but to make one conscious of the heritage left for progeny, as "Man hands on misery to man":

They fuck you up, your mum and dad.
 They mean not to, but they do.
 They fill you with the faults they had
 An add some extra just for you.

But they were fucked up in their turn

(HW, CP142)

Larkin is seen as a poet setting a very negative view on life. In fact he only dispelled disillusion and managed to present experience as he perceived or lived it. When he was asked about this 'negativity' he tried to justify it by pointing to what might be positive in the overall attitude. While admitting that he could be negative, he believed that what is important is the outcome of one's acts.¹ True, Larkin finds negative aspects even in the most expressive signs of hopeful life. In "*The Trees*",

¹ He believed that the "impulse for producing a poem is never negative; the most negative poem in the world is a very positive thing to do. A good poem about failure is a success" (RW 74)

for instance, the burgeoning is not seen as birth--a happy event-- but rather as a sign of grief, meaning the trees “die too”, and not “they are born again”:

The trees are coming into leaf
Like something almost being said;
The recent buds relax and spread,
Their greenness is a kind of grief.
(“*The trees*”, HW, CP: 124)

As with the existentialists, Larkin’s depiction of Man’s negative side has been interpreted as disparaging Man and encouraging vice, immorality, and other negative aspects. In “*Deceptions*”, the speaker, reacting to the young raped girl avowing that she had been drugged and horrified to discover, when she regained her consciousness in the morning, says:

Slums, years, have buried you. I would not dare
Console you if I could. What can be said,
Except that suffering is exact, but where
Desire takes charge, readings will grow erratic?
For you would hardly care
That you were less deceived, out on that bed,
Than he was, stumbling up the breathless stair
To burst into fulfilment’s desolate attic.
(TLD, CP 67)

This has been interpreted as another violence done to the raped girl and as contempt for women in general -misogyny. This ‘negativity’ is used as an argument to deny Larkin any claim for the humanist heritage. But, generally, in his poetry, either what appears to be negative is transformed by virtue of humane quality to something positive or the artistic output is positive. In both situations the negative aspect is counterbalanced by something good. This way Larkin proceeds to show that what is seemingly negative can be ultimately of highly uplifting ending. When it is not the case, he believes that what accounts is the artistic expression of what is experienced. Larkin considers that “(a) good poem about failure is a success” (RW 74). He writes about failure, pessimism in a highly artistic way. This can be seen in poems dealing with difficulties, unhappiness, and evil; and ending in hope, pleasure, and beauty.

In many of his texts, the bleak outlook of the beginning is tempered as the text progresses. “*The Trees*”, for example, whose “greenness is a kind of grief”, in the

first stanza, ends with highly hopeful lines: “Last year is dead, they seem to say/
Begin afresh, afresh, afresh”. This insistence on freshness, through the triple repetition of the word ‘afresh’, contrasts with the previous statements. The above-mentioned reading of “*Deceptions*”, for instance, fails to see in the text the treatment of the existential problem of being entrapped and lured by desire. The speaker who “Even so distant, (I) can taste the grief,/ Bitter and sharp with stalks, he made (you) gulp” is the same individual torn between the need to be in company and the obligation to be left alone. He is also the same individual who when with people, we desires to be alone and when in company, he longs for solitude. Ultimately it is in the existential predicament of modern Man that Larkin is interested. In this poem, it is dealt with the need for Man to pay close attention for the problematic ‘satisfaction’ and fulfilment of desire as he might always be more deceived than those whom he wants to satisfy his wants upon. It is consequently worthless to commit a rape, for example.

With all its apparent pessimism and bleakness, “*Skin*” (TLD, CP 73) can be interpreted, in the same manner, as an invitation to “carpe diem”, here and now. On the outset, it appears all too disappointing:

Obedient daily dress
You cannot always keep
That unfakable young surface.
You must learn your lines—
Anger, amusement, sleep;
Those few forbidding signs

Of the continuous coarse
Sand-laden wind, time;
You must thicken, work loose
Into an old bag
Carrying a soiled name.
Parch then; be roughened; sag;

And pardon me, that I
Could find, when you were new,
No brash festivity
To wear you at, such as
Clothes are entitled to
Till the fashion changes.

But here too we can see that the concluding stanza qualifies the ‘harshness’ of the first and the second one. The speaker’s verdict and truth, which is also Larkin’s, that skin is condemned to deteriorate under the effect of time and be transformed into an “old bag” leads to regretting having not *acted* in the right way. Man’s shaping of his essence has outside visible signs which might be of the kind of finding new festivity, or even create such occasions. There is also here the need to perform social practice to live happily and not have to regret. Festivity is social.

“*The Explosion*” (*HW, CP154*) deals with death of miners, but it is nonetheless filled with transcendental hope. The poem opens by drawing attention to the miners as “shadows” pointing “towards the pithead”. They are “men in pitboots/ Coughing oath-edged talk and pipe-smoke,” moving down the lane in the morning. On the road, “One chased after rabbits; lost them;/ Came back with a nest of lark’s eggs”. At the beginning, the atmosphere is joyful, but the disaster occurs and death strikes. After the miners’ death in the explosion

..... for a second
Wives saw men of the explosion

Larger than in life they managed—
Gold as on a coin, or walking
Somehow from the sun towards them,

One showing the eggs unbroken.

These unbroken eggs in an explosion, in a mine, represent the most convincing image of hope and worth of life. The eggs represent life, an origin; and their fragility is here contrasted with the violence of the explosion. Life overcomes destruction and death, nonetheless. Consequently, one can say that Larkin is more interested in the output of the negative “aspects” he deals with than with these aspects themselves. We will see later that this is peculiar to Larkin. Consequently despite his belief that misery is inescapable, Larkin is capable of strong positive emotions. Furthermore, these readings interested in Larkin’s supposed negativity neglect Man’s potential for self-assessment in his poetry.

Man needs to examine and be conscious of his flaws if he wants to improve his situation. In “*Toads*” the speaker inquires why he has to go to work every day while others are able to make their living by “using their wit”. He wonders:

Why should I let the toad *work*
Squat on my life?
Can't I use my wit as a pitchfork
And drive the brute off?
(CP, 62)

Ultimately this can be seen as very negative. One should advocate going to work, making efforts to own one's life in dignity. But Larkin, at face value seems to plead for the opposite. However the text is a defence for working hard and owing one's living by personal efforts. Going to work means earning money, one's life, and Man's enquiring about the reasons why to go to work or not in also wondering what to do with that money.

This is why this self-assessment concerns also Man's attitude towards money at an age characterized by consumerism, an age where money is believed to be the key to everything, everywhere. This can be seen in "*Money*" (HW, CP...) where 'cheques' rhymes with 'sex'. The self-assessment here proceeds through the speaker looking "at others", to mean the assessment of humankind in general. By observing what the others do with their money, those who do not let it lie there wastefully, and "don't keep it upstairs", but use it to have "a second house and car and wife". But the speaker is convinced that money cannot let you be young for ever and that "the money you save/ Won't in the end buy you more than a shave". He knows that, instead, "money singing" is

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

Here the speaker's self-exploration leads him to conclude that materialism cannot bring satisfaction and happiness as regards the achievement of one's desires. Those who think that money is everything need to see that "Clearly money has something to do with life". It is not life.

In "*High Windows*" this self-assessment is shown in the speaker's turning to himself to consider his thoughts after considering the "couple of kids. And guess he's fucking her". To this observation succeeds his "wonder if/ Anyone looked at me, forty years back,/ And thought, *That'll be the life*". Moreover the poem ends:

Rather than words comes the thought of high windows:
The sun-comprehending glass,
And beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows
Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless.

Internal exploration of the self may lead to this enlightened view made of sun and blue air. Self-assessment starts with a simple observation, moves to satirizing what is seen, but ends in a transcendent positive view. So what seems on the surface negative can bear positive content visible only when explored from its different aspects. In this respect we can say that Larkin joins Sartre in removing the “white mask” from the humanity’s face to put Man in front of his own true image. It is only through such behaviour that can one be useful to humankind, a humanist. In addition, in many of Larkin’s texts, there is a move from desolation to beauty and hope. “*Explosion*”, “*High Windows*”, “*Arundel Tomb*”, for example, are poems in which this attitude is visible.

As far as the accusation of encouraging isolation is concerned, Larkin’s poetry, too, is seen by some as promoting social isolation, characterized, as it is maintained, and as it seems, by its denial or neglect of gregarious instinct in Man. In his life, Larkin felt “the need to be on the periphery of things” (RW 55). Asked about the reason why he chose Hull to live, instead of the big cities where the literary life was concentrated, he answered:

I like it because it's so far away from everywhere else. On the way to nowhere, as somebody put it. It's in the middle of this lonely country, and beyond the lonely country there's only the sea. (RW 54).

He liked this small town because it permitted isolation and solitude. Larkin’s lonely land with this isolated spot at its centre is like “life with a hole in it”¹ and he enjoyed himself in that ‘hole’. The same thing can be said about his characters. In many poems, the speaker is an isolated and lonely individual delivering what he feels and sometimes what he thinks about aspects of life. Very often, Larkin starts with a concrete observation to end with a generalisation. The isolated Man is given a consistent place in his poetry:

One man walking a deserted platform;

¹ See footnote (1) on p. 87 in this study.

Dawn coming, and rain
Driving across a darkening autumn;
One man restlessly waiting a train
While round the streets the wind runs wild
(Emphasis added)

In “*Reasons for Attendance*”, too, the speaker is not willing to merge into the mass of the young dancers. He is drawn to “the lighted glass” through which he just observes what is going on in this society in miniature. This border is never crossed, and the speaker says he is satisfied with his being apart:

...Therefore I stay outside,
Believing this; and they maul to and fro,
Believing that; and both are satisfied,
If no one has misjudged himself. Or lied.
(TLD, CP 48)

In “*Here*”, the lonely speaker tells about a supposed journey through fields and towns. Similarly, “*To the Sea*” is about a man observing the people on the beach and remembering how it was in the past showing a kind of nostalgia for the good old days as he feels alienated:

As when, happy at being on my own,
I searched the sand for Famous Cricketers,
Or, farther back, my parents, listeners
To the same seaside quack, first became known.
Strange to it now.....
(HW, CP 121) (Emphasis added)

Larkin can even be said to be so inclined to isolation that he believes one’s “best society” is one’s own self.

In “*Wants*” (TLD, CP 52), the speaker is sure that however the numerous invitation-cards, the “printed directions of sex”, and the family meetings, there stands “Beyond all this, the wish to be alone” and “Beneath it all, desire of oblivion ...”. Similarly, the speaker in “*Whitsun Weddings*” is an isolated individual contemplating what happens in society (train stations). He observes the others meeting and engaging in relations. Similarly, in “*High Windows*”, the speaker delivers his impressions while observing from his window a couple of kids and guessing that “he is fucking her”. In “*Vers de Société*”, the persona mocks the

invitation he receives from friends (a couple) to attend a party finding it “Funny how hard it is to be alone”. Being at the party and not going is equated respectively with

Just think of all the spare time that has flown
Straight into nothingness by being filled
With forks and faces, rather than repaid
Under a lamp, hearing the noise of the wind,
And looking out to see the moon thinned
To an air-sharpened blade.
(“*Vers de Société*”, HW, CP 147),

The speaker also mocks the beliefs that “*All solitude is selfish*” and “*virtue is social*”, to which he opposes his doubt and scepticism: “Are then these routines// Playing at goodness, like going to church?/ Something that bores us, something we don’t do well....?” This scorn for society stems in fact from the speaker’s regrets that

Only the young can be alone freely.
The time is shorter now for company,
And sitting by a lamp more often brings
Not peace, but other things.
Beyond the light stand failure and remorse

(« *Vers de Société* », HW, CP 148)

In “*Best Society*” (1940s), the speaker longs for solitude as he believes that the best company one can have is one’s own self. His focus on solitude derives from his belief that “the idea of always being in company (is) rather oppressive” as he finds life “more an affair of solitude diversified by company than an affair of company diversified by solitude” (RW:54). But “virtue is social” as well.

Larkin’s apparent dislike of company is nonetheless qualified by his conviction that “solitude is selfish” (“*Vers de Société*” (1971), HW, CP 147). His belief, expressed in “*Best society*”, that the best company one can have is one’s own self changed later. In “*Vers de Société*”, he wrote:

... sitting by a lamp more often brings
Not peace, but other things.
Beyond the light stand failure and remorse
Whispering *Dear Warlock-Williams: Why, of course -*

Larkin's personae, usually onlookers withdrawn from society, are nevertheless inclined to association: In "*Reasons for Attendance*" the speaker is drawn to the lighted glass, to the place where the dancers are though he says that what draws him really is less their society than the music he hears, that "rough-tongued bell". The isolated individual in "*Whitsun Weddings*" ends by leaning more closely through the train window to share with the newly wedded couples. In fact Larkin celebrates communal life and beside this celebration, which we will detail further in the next section, there is in Larkin the regret of parting from company that strengthens his belief in the necessity and worth of social and communal life. The parting is not easily borne in Larkin. In "*Within the Dream You Said*", the speaker says that he felt there were nothing "As cold as my heart" after, in his dream, he heard his girl propose:

Let us kiss then,
In this room, in this bed,
But when all is done
We must not meet again.
(CP 14)

This ache of feeling alone and lonesome when left by others has its antidote however: Happiness and hope found in social life as will be shown in the next pages.

The charge of "dangerous permissiveness" is also levelled against Existentialism as it considers that there are no supernatural standards and eternal verities. This criticism considers the claim that there are neither God's commandments nor "eternal verities" means Man's actions would obey only "pure caprice". Consequently all the values would be relative. Sartre rejects this charge of arbitrariness as it runs contrary to the notion of responsibility. For him if Man's action cannot be performed in an already formed frame of standards, this does not mean that normative issues do not obey rational and universalistic considerations. In Larkin too, this can be seen in his ambivalent attitude towards religion as will be shown more extensively in the next section. There is in his poetry the belief that "No one now/ Believes the hermit with his gown and dish/ Talking to God (*who's gone too*)" ("*Vers de Société*", HW, CP 147, emphasis added), but he feels the need to "construct a religion" and seems to share the belief that "*The dead go on before us, they/ Are sitting in God's house in comfort,/ We shall see them face to face*" ("*The Explosion*", HW, CP 154) (the

passage is in Italics in the poem). This supernatural force is rejected, Larkin tackles the more concrete questions related to religion. He rejects marriage as a social institution, but shows nonetheless a strong concern with Man's fate.

Larkin's further intersection with humanism through existentialism can be seen in his connection with Thomas Hardy. We know that he recognized him as a major influence on him¹. Consequently he should have developed kinship with his writings, in themes and style. Hardy is believed to have developed an Existentialist thought.² Larkin shared the same perspective on life, which seems predominantly negative on the face of it. However, as I have attempted to show so far, the negative or pessimistic outlook on life is but one side of the same coin: an overall attitude in which the negative gives rise to something positive. In defending Existentialism against the attacks of people of different beliefs, Sartre insisted on the humanism of Existentialism insofar as it depicts man's reality and permits possibility. In Larkin this concern with reality is shown through his interest in experience and his insistence on being true to reality. In addition, very often, in Larkin, this possibility is celebrated through the quest for meaning, truth and happiness. The fact of valuing writing based on one's daily simple experience is to believe that the "essence" is thus formed through Man's ordinary and simple acts. By giving expression to his experience of everyday, the poet contributes in shaping Man's essence by making his own through the act of writing.

As can be seen, the charges addressed to Existentialism have been levelled against Larkin and the same arguments as those raised by Sartre to reject them can be found in his poems. We have seen that there are in fact passages which can lend themselves to such readings if considered independently from the whole body of Larkin's poetry. But when confronted with other utterances, numerous in the same corpus, they reveal themselves deniable. The occurrence of Existentialist themes in his poetry makes Larkin a humanist in the Existentialist meaning of the word. It has been argued so far that the "negative" elements in Larkin's poems, from the existentialist point of view, can be read as arguments of a humanist outlook on life. Larkin can be thus said

¹ See Philip Larkin, "Wanted: *Good Hardy Critic*," *Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces 1955-1982* (London: Faber, 1983) pp. 168-74.

² "Although Hardy read no Existentialist thinkers except Nietzsche, his wide observation and experience of life enabled him to know the characteristic features of the philosophy of existence...Hardy is an Existentialist writer like Camus, Kafka, Mailer and Dostoyevski". (Malikarjun Patil, *Thomas Hardy's Poetry and Existentialism* (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 1999) p. 33.

to have made use of existentialist clues to reinforce a humanist view on life. So he did not only use Existentialist arguments to further undermine modernism, of which Existentialism is an aspect, as John Osborne says in his essay "*Postmodernism and Postcolonialism in Larkin*". However, this is only one part of the argument as there are, in addition, independently from this philosophy, purely humanist principles in his poems.

Section 2: The Centrality of the Individual and the Worth of Life

In Humanism, Man is, as Protagoras put it, “the measure of all things”.¹ Larkin’s poetry, too, is concerned with man and centred on the individual. Each poem deals with an aspect of life. Man and his environment, man in society, man in his interaction with others, man and his own self are his themes. He depicts Man’s predicament, his experiences, his emotions and life in isolation and in society, his prospects and his quest for meaning. If, presumably, he does not over-value Man in his poetry, he does not disparage him nonetheless nor approve of misanthropy.

Larkin’s interest in Man’s love of life pervades his poetry. This loved and praised life is made of happiness. Thus Man can find joy in beauty, love and sex, for example. Larkin’s first major collection, *The Less Deceived* (1945), opens with a poem dedicated to beauty and love, and consequently to life. In “*Lines on a Young Lady’s Photograph Album*”, while appreciating the photographs of the young lady the speaker’s “swivel eye hungers from page to page” choking “on such nutritious images”. The poem is immediately followed by “*Wedding Wind*”, a text where despite the disturbances caused by nature, the future is perceived hopefully:

The wind blew all my wedding-day,
And my wedding-night was the night of the high wind;
And a stable door was banging, again and again,
That he must go and shut it, leaving me
Stupid in candlelight, hearing rain,
Seeing my face in the twisted candlestick,
Yet seeing nothing. When he came back
He said the horses were restless, and I was sad
That any man or beast that night should lack
The happiness I had. (TLD, CP 45)

Moreover, to the windy night succeeds a sunny day. The next morning, in spite of the distance of the day which contrasts with the closeness of night, and despite the separation imposed by the daily chores of each one, the bride wonders:

Can it be borne, this bodying-forth by wind
Of joy my actions turn on, like a thread
Carrying beads? Shall I be let to sleep

¹ Qtd in: Willystine Goodsell, *The conflict of Naturalism and Humanism*, New York: Teachers College, 1910, p. 7.

Now this perpetual morning shares my bed?
Can even death dry up
These new delighted lakes, conclude
Our kneeling as cattle by all-generous waters?
(*Wedding Wind*, TLD, CP 45)

This “perpetual morning” is a morning of disturbances interrupting a happy encounter. However, there is in it the prospect of being “let to sleep”. Hope counterbalances death’s potency of annihilation. To the manifest ecstasy of the first stanza and the “happiness” of the wedding, succeeds the storm. This does not prevent the bride to hope and see in this signs of happiness as expressed by the adjectives “delighted” and “all-generous”.

Happiness can also be found in nature. Man appreciates and finds ecstasy in nature and very often longs for a harmonious relation with his environment. “*Coming*” is an ode to life as

On longer evenings,
Light (...)
Bathes the serene
Foreheads of houses”.

Along with light, there comes a thrush singing “It will be spring soon”. However hard life, there is always hope that something astonishingly good be born. Besides beauty as is shown in “*Lylpa*” and nature (“*Coming*”), Man can find happiness in art.

“*Reasons for Attendance*” embodies Larkin’s belief that what is not found in communal life can be experienced in art. The speaker refuses to join the dancers who think that happiness resides in sex and is convinced that joy can only be found in that “rough-tongued bell/ (Art if you like) whose individual sound/ Insists I too am individual” (TLD, CP 48). However, the speaker sticks to his beliefs and does not reject the others’. He insists on the satisfaction of the two sides to highlight the autonomy of the individual, the relativity of truth, and the importance of subjectivity:

It speaks; I hear; others may hear as well

But not for me, nor I for them; and so
With happiness. Therefore I stay outside;
Believing this; and they maul to and fro,

Believing that; and both are satisfied,
If no one has misjudged himself. Or lied.

In a world of happiness, Man manifests his attachment to life. Besides, life is worthwhile because it is brief. In “*Cut Grass*”, the speaker insists on the brevity of life in comparison with death, highlighting thus his attachment to it:

Cut grass lies frail:
Brief is the breath
Mown stalks exhale.
Long, long the death
(HW, CP 153)

This attachment to life is so strong that Larkin moderates his disbelief in the afterlife. As if it is not easy to leave this world without any perspective for life to be carried on, he displays a possibility of another ‘existence’ after death in the last poem of his last collection, “*The Explosion*”. Here, the transcendent content of the poem contrasts sharply with the view expressed in his previous texts. He surprises with qualifying his sceptic view of life and religion as the dead miners in the explosion do not totally disappear, but continue to comfortably exist beyond this world:

*The dead go on before us they
Are sitting in God’s house in comfort
We shall see them face to face--*

plain as lettering in the chapels
It was said and for a second
Wives saw men of the explosion

Larger than in life they managed--
Gold as on a coin or walking
Somehow from the sun towards them

One showing the eggs unbroken.
(HW, CP 120) (Italics original)

In addition to the use of positive motifs to value life, Larkin makes, paradoxically, use of negative ones to insist on what is positive.

Death, for instance, is employed to show the value of life. In “*Cut Grass*”, it is used to insist on the worth of life. Here, the contrast between the brevity of the breath, the last manifestation of life, and the length of death shows that life is

valuable. In addition, death is more terrible as it comes at a period when life is at its best:

Cut grass lies frail:
Brief is the breath
Mown stalks exhale.
Long, long the death

It dies in the white hours
Of young-leafed June
With chestnut flowers,
With hedges snowlike strewn,

White lilac bowed,
Lost lanes of Queen Anne's lace,
And that high-builded cloud
Moving at summer's pace.

Larkin invokes the 'death' of grass to speak about human existence; and it is precisely this interest in the nature of human existence that we are going to further explore in what follows.

This Humanism is interested in the human possibilities of experience at different levels: individual, social and even metaphysical. This view considers that man is autonomous, ruled by no other systems of laws, or forces than those he has inside himself. It sees that man is endowed with moral, aesthetic, and intellectual power to "shape creatively the elements of experience". Larkin strongly insisted on the importance of experience. For him, to write a poem is to shape a verbal device capable of preserving an experience in order to share it with those who would read it. Larkin believed that the "impulse to preserve lies at the bottom of all art" and thought he himself was concerned with preserving "the experience" and "the beauty" in his poetry (RW 68). Calvin Bedient points to his subtlety in pushing further this aspect by asserting that Larkin

...puts experience under an aspect of beauty, gracing and deepening it with the illusion of necessary form and producing the privileged sensation—perhaps illusory, perhaps not—of piercing through to a truth.¹

¹ In Calvin Bedient, *Eight Contemporary Poets*, p. 89

In Larkin's poetry, the experience and the reflection of an experience is a matter of the "true" and the "beautiful". His texts are, in some situations, reflections on moral questions, like in "*Deceptions*", the title poem of *The Less Deceived*. In other situations they are appreciations and comments on certain truths. This can be seen in "*The Old Fools*" where the speaker rejects the belief that being old is synonymous of being wise and more grown up:

What do they think has happened, the old fools,
To make them think like this? Do they somehow suppose
It's more grown-up when your mouth hangs open and drools,
An you keep on pissing yourself, and can't remember
Who called this morning?
(HW, CP 131)

The speaker tells here about his appreciation of the old age and contrasts his view with the others' beliefs. Through irony, displayed in the use of the interrogative form throughout the first stanza, the speaker questions the old people's belief in their ability, "if they only chose", to "alter things back to when they danced all night". The speaker is sure that there has been change in their lives, despite their fancies and asks: "Why aren't they screaming?" He imposes his own truth on the events.

From the aesthetic point of view, Larkin gave art predominance. He was obsessed by success in writing throughout his life and kept asking himself "whether he was right to sacrifice his life in order to perfect his work" (Motion 139). This is in addition visible in his poems. In "*Reasons for Attendance*" the speaker is drawn by "The trumpet's voice, loud and authoritative". In "*For Sidney Bechet*" (WW, CP 87) , the speaker loves the Jazz tune played by Bechet, the clarinettist and saxophonist from New Orleans:

That note you hold, narrowing and rising, shakes
Like New Orleans reflected on the water,
.....
Oh, play that thing! Mute glorious Storyvilles
Others may license, grouping round their chairs
Sporting-house girls like circus tigers...
.....
On me your voice falls as they say love should,
Like an enormous yes. My Crescent City
Is where your speech alone is understood,

And greeted as the natural noise of good,
Scattering long-haired grief and scored pity.

This hymn to Jazz and art in general is also encountered in “*Reference Back*” where the speaker tells about a past experience listening to music with someone:

*That was a pretty one, I heard you call
From the unsatisfactory hall
To the unsatisfactory room where I
Played record after record...*

Oliver’s *Riverside Blues*, it was. And now
I shall, I suppose, always remember how
The flock of notes those antique Negroes blew
Out of Chicago air into
A huge remembering pre-electric horn
The year after I was born
Three decades later made this sudden bridge from your unsatisfactory age
To my unsatisfactory prime.

(TWW, CP 111)

Another positive perspective in Larkin’s poetry is his valuation of Man. This can be seen in the nuances of some of his understandings. As far as his view of people is concerned, and which is believed, by some at least, to be negative, Larkin is not easily classifiable. He said for example that when he was young he thought he did not like people, but later realized that in fact it were children only he disliked. However, this supposed ‘hatred’ is denied in the poem he dedicated to his friend Kingsley Amis’ daughter, Sally, at her birth. The text confirms his love for children:

Tightly-folded bud,
I have wished you something
None of the others would:
Not the usual stuff
About being beautiful,
Or running off a spring
Of innocence and love—
They will all wish you that,
And should it prove possible,
Well, you’re a lucky girl.

But if it shouldn’t, then

May you be ordinary;
Have, like other women,
An average of talents:

Not ugly, not good-looking,
 Nothing uncustomary
 To pull you off your balance,
 That, unworkable itself,
 Stops all the rest from working.
 In fact, may you be dull—
 If that is what a skilled,
 Vigilant, flexible,
 Unemphasised, enthralled
 Catching of happiness is called.
 (“*Born Yesterday*”, TLD, CP 54)

True, there is in Larkin’s poetry satire on humans, in certain situations. In “*Faith Healing*” (TWW, CP 86), the speaker just describes the women filing to the American healer and expresses his contempt for them: “...*Now, dear child, What’s wrong, the deep American voice demands*”; And further: “... some/ Sheepishly stray”; and also the expression: “Moustached in flowered frocks” (emphasis added). However there is some misunderstanding of this stance of Larkin which reminds us of Heidegger’s words defending himself against almost the same charges:

Because we are speaking against ‘humanism’, people fear a defense of the inhuman and glorification of barbaric brutality (...) I ought to be somewhat clearer now that opposition to ‘humanism’ in no way implies a defence of the inhuman but rather opens other vistas.¹

Similarly, Larkin’s satire of some human practices has been confused as shunning of Man and mockery of sociability. In fact, in many passages, this “Hermit of Hull” as some called him, describes the others in harsh words. However, this view of Larkin as a man withdrawn to the margin of society -the periphery, as he calls it- to severely judge it is challengeable.

His supposed shunning of inferior classes, for instance, found in expressions like the “grinning and pomaded ... girls in parodies of fashion” (“*Whitsun Weddings*”), or the “mug faced middle-aged wives” (“*Show Saturday*”), “old rat bags” (“*The Life with a Hole in it*”) or that of the working class people who “(...)leave at dawn low terraced houses / Timed for factory, yard and site” (“*The Large Cool Store*”) and who are seen as: “A cut-price crowd, urbane yet simple, dwelling/ Where only salesmen and relations come” (“*Here*”) extends to upper classes of the “*Vers de*

¹Heidegger, “A Letter on Humanism”, *From modernism to postmodernism: An Anthology*, Cahoon (ed.), Indianapolis: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2003, Second Edition, pp. 187-188 (the whole text is on pp. 174-194).

Société” whose practices are mocked to show that the interest is not in discriminating classes and humans but in trying to understand life: “*My wife and I have asked a crowd of craps,/ To come and waste their time and ours: perhaps/ You’d care to join us? In a pig’s arse, friend.*” (CP 147) This has been interpreted as contempt of lower classes in particular and shunning of humankind in general. However, this reading ignores the fact that Larkin wrote: “In 1940, our impulse was still to minimize social differences rather than exaggerate them” (RW 17). This concern is visible in his poetry as well.

In “*Naturally The Foundation Will Bear Your Expenses*”, Larkin’s sympathy goes to the crowd as a victim of an arrogant individual. He parodies the speaker’s attitude by pointing that he has nothing extraordinary, or say, really different from the crowds he despises. Beside the “solemn-sinister/ wreath-rubbish” he condemns, he can hardly hurry to catch his comet. Even his supposed freedom is only physical (“outsoar the Thames”) and not spiritual as Whalen explains adding that, artistically, Larkin makes use of language to scorn “the conventional bearing of the speaker’s scorn for conventional mentality” such as incidental phrases, clichés (“it used to make me throw up/ these mawkish...”) and his clichéd behaviour displayed by his second-hand knowledge (“Mirror of the third”). The other irony in the poem is the fact that it is the ‘Foundation’, i.e., another ‘crowd’, that will bear the speaker’s expenses. T.A. Whalen points here to:

...a reasonably thorough sense of the poet’s concern with the pathos of the crowds, a pathos which includes the realisation of their identity as *victimized ordinary humanity*.¹ (Emphasis mine)

So even in poems where there is satire and apparent disrespect, Larkin reveals another side, that of the positive humanity. Larkin’s sympathy with ordinary humanity can be seen at other levels. In “*Naturally the Foundations Will Bear Your Expenses*”, for example, we can “...witness Larkin’s assertion of the *value of commonplace* when considered next to the *narrowness of assumed academic superiority*”² (emphasis added) because of the speaker satirising those “colourless and careworn” crowds.

¹ Terrence Anthony Whalen, *Philip Larkin and English poetry*, Volume 1986, Part 2, p. 80. (www. Googlebooks.com)

² *Ibid.*, p. 78.

In fact Larkin did not simply insist on the worth of sociability or his preference for isolation. He rather discussed Man's predicament and absurd situation as summed up in "*The Wave Sings Because It Is Moving*":

Apart, we think we wish ourselves together,
Yet sue for solitude upon our meetings,
Till the unhindered turning of the sea
Changes our comforts into griefs greater
That they were raised to cancel, breaking them.
(and the wave sings because it is moving)

This seems in conformity with the nuance he sets on his attitude towards people. He once said: "...I am not fond of company. I'm very fond of people, but it's difficult to get people without company" (RW, 54). This existentialist and absurd situation is also encountered in his 'dreams' and expectancies. In fact he complained about his inclination to always desire remote things, neglecting all that is accessible, what is not "out of reach".¹ He also summed up the difficult situation of Man in his ignorance of what is in him and attractiveness to what is in others: "Everyone envies everyone else" (RW 62). It is in reality this difficult situation of always desiring something that is absent that makes Larkin discuss both sides of it, certainly with more emphasis on what is negative. But to highlight the intense positivity that lies behind it. Larkin is humanist in insisting on the duration of what is good and on its intensity. Love remains indefinitely and survives humans as is said in "*An Arundel Tomb*": "What will survive of us is love".

Consequently, when he is thought to speak "against humanism"; he actually expresses the view that Man's good is not always where the majority of people think it is. In being satirical on humans, Larkin just wanted to show the drawbacks of overestimating Man. He felt that Man did not need to make a myth of his own self. The true humanism, then, was the one capable of pointing to the wrongs of Man in order to correct them. Sincerity and truth to the self were two major ingredients for such a perspective, one promoting a positive view of life.

¹ He wrote: "I'm a romantic bastard. Remote things seem desirable. Bring them close, and I start shitting myself" (Qtd in James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Writer*, p. 21).

Section 3: The Quest for Truth

Humanism, like Existentialism, focuses on Man's need to find or give meaning to life. This quest is visible throughout Larkin's statements and poetry. In many poems, he asks questions about the meaning of life, tries to understand, and shows a great tension between the desire and the need to know, and the impossibility of finding meaning in the world. This is reflected in his poetry through dualisms. Although he believed that whatever one's thought about life, it was necessarily wrong, he kept enquiring about complex as well as trivial things. In 1949, he wrote:

What I mean is that any ideas about life are almost certain to be wrong. Every idea that I have imbibed I hereby eject, such as that confusion is succeeded by unity, pain by pleasure, failure by success, poverty by riches, celibacy by marriage, atheism by belief, clean shavenness by whiskers, or ignorance by knowledge. I refuse to believe that there is a thing called life, that one can be in or out of touch with. There is only an endless series of events of which our birth is one & our death is another. ¹

Concretely, in Larkin's poems, Man turns to himself through the perpetual questioning of his beliefs, assumptions, and ideas; and outside through the exploration of the way he interacts with his environment.

Larkin generally starts with real and ordinary facts to extend them to 'true' generalisations or transcendental beauty, which can be interpreted as an assertion that truth lies in earthly things.² This can be seen in "*Whitsun Weddings*", "*The Trees*", as well as in "*Dockery and Son*", to mention just a few poems. In the latter, the poet starts with the college Dean's words: "Dockery was junior to you,/ Wasn't he? (...) His son's here now" to end with:

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 the only end of age.

This move from the ordinary, and the particular, toward the general and the abstract is frequent in his poetry. Here from the 'realist' observation of a fact –that Dockery

¹In a letter to J.B. Sutton on 13 July, (SL, p. 154)

²See, François Gallix, "*La leçon de Choses de Philip Larkin*", *Etudes Britanniques Contemporaines* n° 3. Montpellier: Presses universitaires de Montpellier, 1994. 35-50.

was younger than the speaker- Larkin moves to a general statement about life, a truth. This concern with truth is visible in many poems. In “*Send No Money*” (TWW, CP 114), the speaker, addressing time, says: “*Tell me the truth (...)/ Teach me the way things go*”. Time tells him to “*Sit here, and watch the hail / Of occurrence clobber life out / To a shape no one sees*”. He sits down and realises that “*Half life is over now,/ And I meet full face on dark mornings*”. He is sorry as he says:

In this way I spent youth,
Tracing the trite untransferable
Truss-advertisement, *truth*
(Emphasis mine).

In “*Talking in Bed*”, Larkin uses repeatedly, in different forms, the word “true”. Despite “darkness that creeps up” in isolation, the last lines of the poem bear a humanist concern:

It becomes still more difficult to find
Words at once *true and kind*,
Or *not untrue and not unkind*
(emphasis mine)

In addition to the recognition of Man’s limits, Larkin is here concerned with truth and kindness. Man is caught in a difficult dilemma of having to choose between being true, sincere, whatever the seriousness of things to say, and being kind and dissimulate the hurtful truth.

In “*Dockery And Son*” (TWW, CP 108), the speaker comments on the dean’s belief that because Dockery has a son, he has succeeded in life: “Why did he think adding meant increase?”, he asks. For the speaker adding (having children) is “dilution”. This dilution of the self preoccupies Larkin. For, he believes that these beliefs stem from “(...) Not from what / We think truest, or most want to do”:

(...) They’re more a style
Our lives bring with them: habit for a while,
Suddenly they harden into all we have got

And how we got it (...)

Here, Larkin makes use of rhetoric to dismantle some beliefs he wants to refute. Contrary to the Dean who believes that marriage is good, giving the example of Dockery, the speaker is formal: "To have no son, no wife,/ No house or land still seemed quite natural". For the difference does not lie in having "taken stock of what he wanted, and been capable/ Of..." It rather resides in "how/ Convinced he was he should be added to" (CP, 108). The existentialist rejection of established beliefs and systems is softened into a humanist desire for contact in Larkin, even through those beliefs.

More interestingly, this quest for meaning sometimes transcends the palpable to attain highly beautiful 'sights'. Larkin seeks satisfaction in the abstract too and even the unattainable desire to scent "purer water / Not here but anywhere" ("*The Wires*", CP 57). In Larkin's poetry, Man often looks to and longs for this 'anywhere'. In "*Here*" the speaker swerves along, through towns and countryside, before he gets where

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" ("*Here*", CP 80).

Larkin's characters' inclination to curiously explore new territories in search of meaning to life is existentialist, and humanist. This search for meaning is painful nonetheless. The speaker in "*And the Wave Sings Because it is Moving*", for instance, believes that:

Such are the sorrows that we search for meaning,
Such are the cries of birds across the waters,
Such are the mists the sun attacks at morning,
Laments, tears, wreaths, rocks, all ridden down
By the shout of the heart continually at work
To break with beating all our false devices;

In "*Wedding Wind*", the bride finds meaning to her life after a disturbed and painful wedding night. It is thus through communion and sharing that she finally understands that she would thereafter be responsible for all the rest of her life. She sees even her simple actions in the farm as part of a great enterprise, life in general, which seems to her now "like a thread carrying beads." Furthermore this move from the concrete to

the abstract, in search for meaning, brings discomfort when truth cannot be found. For, Larkin is concerned with 'truth'. The truth about one's relationship with one's parents ('They fuck you up, Your Mum and Dad'), the truth about modern life ("*High Windows*"), the truth about childhood and growing up ("*I Remember, I Remember*"), the truth about home ("*Home is so sad*"), and the truth about being old ("The old fools").¹

Larkin is also humanist in his concern with beauty and truth². Moreover there is his concern with truth to individual experience. This is rendered by his concern with realistic descriptions, and sincerity. The verisimilitude and the descriptive detail confer to his poems a particular characteristic of close reality: "like sour smoke, the odour of actual days hangs about them. They have an unusual authenticity; they form a reliving." (Bedient: 75). When Larkin is convinced by something, however contrary to the general acceptance, he makes us know. Asked for the reason why his poems were so concerned with unhappiness, loss, a sense of missing out", he answered:

Actually, I like to think of myself as quite funny, and I hope this comes through in my writing. But it's unhappiness that provokes a poem. Being happy doesn't provoke a poem. As Montherlant says somewhere, happiness writes white. It's very difficult to write about being happy. Very easy to write about being miserable. And I think writing about unhappiness is the source of my popularity, if I have any—after all most people *are* unhappy, don't you think? (RW:47).

For Larkin the prevalence of unhappiness among people is a fact, a "truth". In his poetry, he conveys this in 'realistic' descriptions, a way, for him, to be faithful to "experience".

This fidelity to 'reality' can be seen in his comment on the composition of "*Whitsun Weddings*", in an interview with John Haffenden, where he says: "It was just the transcription of a very happy afternoon. I didn't change a thing; it was just there to be written down"³. It is then the embodiment of truth, of what really happened. In this poem Larkin describes the newly wedded couples he sees at the

¹ See J.D. Porteous, *Environmental aesthetics: ideas, politics and planning*, New York: Routledge, 1996, P 152, and "*Nowhereman*", in <www.philiplarkin.com>.

² See his statement in "*Larkin's Poetics*" on page 21 of this study.

³ Quoted in A.T. Tolley "*On First Looking into Larkin's The Less Deceived*" , www.philiplarkin.com

train stations from his seat inside the train. This ‘truth’ is communicated by means of ordinariness, the commonplace, accessibility, and even obscenity.

As Motion writes, Larkin “tackles the big, central issues of ordinary life in the language of ordinary speech and makes them numinous”¹. While he himself says: ‘I don’t want to transcend the commonplace; I love the commonplace.’ And this commonplace is visible throughout his three major collections of poetry. In “*Here*”, for example, the speaker delivers a documentary description of the town:

... 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. (...)
(WW, CP 79-80)

This love of the commonplace is visible in the praise of ordinariness in his poetry through the insistence on simple and daily things and chores. The landscape depicted in “*Here*” as well as the details of the daily ordinary life support this idea of finding happiness and meaning in very simple things. This is symbolised in the “miniature gaiety” of the past of “*To The Sea*” and the “arrows somewhere becoming rain” of “*Whitsun Weddings*”. Furthermore the detailed description of little ordinary things is very often associated with communal practices. In “*To the Sea*” Larkin makes strong use of this association where the ordinary things are part of social life:

Everything crowds under the low horizon:
Steep beach, blue water, towels, red bathing caps,
The small hushed waves' repeated fresh collapse

¹ (Motion, *AWL* 343).

Up the warm yellow sand, and further off
A white steamer stuck in the afternoon--

Still going on, all of it, still going on!
To lie, eat, sleep in hearing of the surf
(Ears to transistors, that sound tame enough
Under the sky), or gently up and down
Lead the uncertain children, frilled in white
And grasping at enormous air, or wheel
The rigid old along for them to feel
A final summer, plainly still occurs
As half an annual pleasure, half a rite,

As when, happy at being on my own,
I searched the sand for Famous Cricketers,
Or, farther back, my parents, listeners
To the same seaside quack, first became known.
Strange to it now, I watch the cloudless scene:
The same clear water over smoothed pebbles,
The distant bathers' weak protesting trebles
Down at its edge, and then the cheap cigars,
The chocolate-papers, tea-leaves, and, between

The rocks, the rusting soup-tins, till the first
Few families start the trek back to the cars.
The white steamer has gone. Like breathed-on glass
The sunlight has turned milky. If the worst
Of flawless weather is our falling short,
It may be that through habit these do best,
Coming to the water clumsily undressed
Yearly; teaching their children by a sort
Of clowning; helping the old, too, as they ought.
(WW, CP)

Larkin believes that “the essence of his (the poet) gift is to re-create the familiar, and it is from the familiar that he draws his strength” (RW 90). This interest in ordinariness stems from Larkin’s rejection of all that is obscure. He believed that poetry should be accessible for the average reader. This is but an application of what he believed poetry should do and how it should proceed. But, as for every aspect, the need for qualifying any ‘certainty’ concerning any aspect of his work resurfaces concerning his “ordinariness”. Truth is also sincerity and honesty, but Larkin is humanist in his belief that truth is relative. He believes that

Everything called good is what we like, envy, admire, want, thrill to. A great book, a great man, are things a great many people greatly admire. And the

reasons for people's admiration are fishy enough to fill the North Sea, and certainly not ethical or even respectable" (SL 154)

To live, Man needs to constantly correlate with his social and natural environment. This relation is marked, in Larkin's poetry, by the perpetual questioning of established 'truths' to further understand life. Thus even the well established beliefs, are discussed, and rejected, to permit reflection and change. In this, Larkin's attitude is similar to that of the Renaissance artists who reacted to the then dominant ideas, beliefs, and well-established views. He made use of reason to discriminate what was fit for modern life and was 'incompatible' with it. He was someone convinced that the standards of life did not need to be dictated from spheres outside concrete life. He thus rejected the supernatural power and religion. His attitude towards religion as a whole is not so sharply delineated however.

Section 4: The Rejection of the Supernatural

Humanism makes sense of the world using reason, experience and shared human values. It values man and his abilities and believes that because man can change things and is capable of improving himself, he does not need any supernatural power. The only 'religion' he needs is confidence in his capacity for change and development. Philip Larkin, who was once told by his father to: "Never believe in God!", displayed a similar attitude towards religion. His father's injunction is visible in his life and work. As if to have a precise idea about it, he bought a Bible and used to read a passage every morning while shaving. Thus he concluded that it was "absolutely bloody amazing to think that anyone ever believed any of that. Really, it's absolute balls. Beautiful, of course. But balls."¹ He also said that he was "bored, uninformed"² by and about religion. However, he did not completely reject it as can be seen in his declaration: "I am an agnostic, an *Anglican* agnostic, of course." (Emphasis added). In "*Aubade*", religion is a "vast moth-eaten musical brocade". It is "beautiful", but helpless in front of death.

So, Larkin integrated religion in his art like the Italian Renaissance artists who continued to use it in their works.³ His attitude integrates dismissal and praise. This dismissal --of God in particular-- is expressed in poems as well as in other prose writings and declarations. In "*Vers de Société*", Larkin states that people no longer believe "in the hermit with his gown and dish/ Talking to God (*who's gone too*)..." (HW, CP, 147) (Emphasis mine).

On the contrary, in other texts, like his juvenilia poem "*A stone Church Damaged By a Bomb*" (1943), the church is "(p)lanted deeper than roots" (CP 164, Uncollected). It reverberates light and heat as "(w)indows throw back the sun" and in "*Church Going*", he writes: "I have worshiped that whispering shell". In this poem, there is a strong belief in the need to go into these apparently no longer useful places. "*Solar*" and "*Water*" are two other poems that refer to religion in general, and "*Faith Healing*" deals with the particular belief that some religious practices

¹ Quoted in Lachlan Mackinnon, "*Larkin: Always an agnostic - but an Anglican agnostic*", *The Independent*. (Friday, 11 January 2002. www.independent.co.uk.)

² Ibid.

³ While the Renaissance was in essence a reaction against the dominance of religion, Leonardo De Vinci, Micheangelo and Bocaccio used religios motifs in their paintings and decorated churches and cathedrals.

can heal Man's ache. *"The Explosion"* reveals another belief, one which has been strongly denied so far: that of life after death. So there is the Larkinian characteristic ambivalence in these poems as he seems both atheist and agnostic. Consequently, against the generally accepted atheism in Larkin, some critics point to transcendence, mysticism, and sacramentalism in his poetry. D. King writes that

...Larkin's use of sacramental motifs follows a pattern missed by the revisionists that illustrates his growing curiosity about spiritual matters. That is, despite his agnosticism, his frequent focus on sacramental motifs belies the idea that he totally dismisses things spiritual and infers instead a developing if muted affirmation.¹

The truth is that Larkin distinguishes God, as presented by religion, from the social practices stemming from religious beliefs. He thus manifests a kind of reverence for religion as a tradition. In *"Church Going"* (1954) "this special shell" houses the three major steps in Man's life --"marriage and birth/ And death"—and, more interestingly, this "serious house on serious earth (...) / In whose blent air all our compulsions meet" houses "*thoughts* of these", too (emphasis mine). 'Thought' being proper to Man, Larkin, rather than insisting on the mysterious aspect of religion, values this ability of making sense of things metaphysical. Thought transforms church into a place "proper to grow wise in".

Larkin does not fully reject religion because it can lead to, or help create, beauty. If it does not, it is merely useless. In *"Water"* (TWW, CP 91), Larkin writes:

If I were called in
To construct a religion
I should make use of water.

(...)

And I should raise in the east
A glass of water
Where any-angled light
Would congregate endlessly.

So, if the artist has to substitute himself to God in the act of creation, he should transfer adoration from a supernatural force to beauty. This is ambition of Man acquire what is supposed to be God's attributes (the power of creation) is humanist in itself. It is characteristic of the Greek traditional thought and the European

¹ In Don W. King, *"Sacramentalism in the Poetry of Philip Larkin"*, www.montreat.edu

Renaissance spirit. More over, the construction intended in this poem leads to a “congregation” where the humans would find the warmth they lack in their life of loneliness and alienation. In this text, Larkin also links religion to hope. By relating it to water, he stresses the hopeful side of life as water symbolises life and purity. This is the expression of a wish in which the whole humanity would be embarked.

This use of religious motifs to value Man is also visible in “*Church Going*”. Larkin said that this poem was about

(...) going to church, not religion (...). 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 represent”, he declared.¹

In general, Larkin does not reject that which he does not believe in. Although he disbelieved in God, Larkin did not reject religion. He was an agnostic who believed that

We [...] must stick to mysticism, religion, and the poetic unconscious. In particular I must find faith in the highest and the lowest: I mean I must experience the religion of creation and imagination (to use an old-fashioned world) and as well a religion of scrubbing a floor. At present I vacillate hopelessly between the two, prudent and pallid. But Wm Blake says ‘the road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom’. He says ‘If the fool persist in his folly he will become wise’ (...) so I am delving into my soul with the hope of finding something” (SL 53)

He showed an interest in the ‘lowest’ because of his conviction that this could be the way to the sublime. Among the critics who have explored the treatment of religion in his poetry, Don King says that in Larkin’s poetry, “the sacramental may be defined as that which suggests a metaphysical mystery or secret somehow just beyond human understanding.” Moreover King believes that the sacramental motifs temper Larkin’s scepticism. In “*Church Going*”, Larkin displays a respect of religion through a kind of reverence for the churches the speaker cannot avoid visiting:

Yet stop I did: in fact I often do,
And always end much at a loss like this,
Wondering what to look for; wondering, too,

¹ Quoted in Stephen Regan, (ed). *Philip Larkin: contemporary Critical Essays*, London: Palgrave, 1997, p.33.

When churches fall completely out of use
What we shall turn them into . . .
(*“Church Going”*, HW, CP 58)

However, Larkin adheres to the belief that religion is not necessary. The speaker in this poem continues to go inside the church though he knows that he has nothing to do there nonetheless. Larkin reveals here all the humanism of his character who, though he feels lost once inside, he does not avoid stepping in, to see what is going on there. And it is this curiosity, the call to knowledge that can be interpreted as humanist. Tolerance, in this poem, is expressed through the speaker revealing himself only a non-believer, not anti-religious.

This sense of measure can also be seen in *“Compline”*¹. Out of respect for those who believe in God, and out of his own respect for the communal and the traditional, Larkin does not oppose praying if God could satisfy the wish:

Behind the radio’s altarlight
The hurried talk to God goes on:
*Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done,
Produce our lives beyond this night,
Open our eyes again to sun.*

Unhindered in the dingy wards
Lives flicker out, one here, one there,
To send some weeping down the stair
With love unused, in unsaid words:
For this I would have quenched the prayer,

But for the thought that nature spawns
A million eggs to make one fish.
Better that endless notes beseech
As many nights, as many dawns,
If finally God grants the wish.

In *“The Explosion”*, the miners are not “extinguished” after their death as

The dead go on before us they
Are sitting in God’s house in comfort
We shall see them face to face--

Plain as lettering in the chapels
It was said and for a second
Wives saw men of the explosion

¹ *“Compline”* (1950), quoted in Le Gaufrey, p. 14

Larger than in life they managed--
Gold as on a coin or walking
Somehow from the sun towards them

One showing the eggs unbroken.

Yet this mystical bent in his poems is not enough to claim that Larkin can be considered a “reputed” mystic. But there is enough evidence in his work which allows maintaining that there exists humanist ‘reverence’ for Man’s heritage. In this respect, King fails to see in this perspective, the humanist consideration for tolerance and acceptance of the others’ beliefs and opinions. There is in fact in “*Church Going*”, not a belief in the afterlife, but a respect for the widows’ transcendental hope, as well as for the memory of the dead miners.

So from the religious point of view, as we have seen in the previous chapter, Larkin can be said to believe in the Nietzschean credo that “God is dead”. Religion, in its social dimension can however be of some use to mankind as it offers the possibility of ritual meetings. This for Larkin is comparable to congregating light as he writes in “*Water*”. Man’s ability to construct may lead him to “congregate light endlessly”. This anthropocentrism reinforced by the worth of the ability of Man to be ultimately positive and bring happiness to his fellows is humanist. There is here the doubt, or the possibility expressed with the conditional “if”. For Larkin, religion is a construction, a process needing several steps to perform, and consequently, time. Transcendence is thus condensed in the last stanza where religion is equated with water and light, i.e., life. From this point of view, contrarily to what is largely assumed, Larkin rejects no one.

Section 5: Humanistic Qualities in Larkin's Poetry

Larkin's attitude, as displayed in his poetry, seems predominantly negative. But this does not prevent him from being generously humanist. In his poetry, he was concerned with issues that showed him sensitive to his environment, concerned with preserving humanity's heritage and having good relations. This is also valid with his attitude in life. He is said to have been kind to his colleagues as well as to other people attending his library, while his letters reveal him ultimately negative. Recollecting the people he met at work, for example, he writes:

I found myself thinking of individual readers: the boy I had introduced to the Sherlock Holmes stories, the old lady who sent a messenger for her books and whose final note I still have: 'Owing to failing sight, I have decided no longer to be a Member of the "Free Library". Please accept of my grateful thanks for kindly choosing books for me during the past years...' and others such as the lady who gave me ten 'Cogent' cigarettes at Christmas (product of the Scottish Co-operative Wholesale society). (RW: 35)

Andrew Motion writes that, when he went to teach at the University of Hull in 1976, he tried to avoid meeting Larkin who had been there as a librarian for 21 years, intimidated by his "formidable fame", his dumbness and his distrust of academics and their students, but he was surprised to find him "disarmingly courteous" when he first met him (Motion xv).

Larkin loved people who lived around him and love is one of his major themes. He dealt with it from different points of view. In his life Larkin showed reticence towards women, and even contempt in his private writings. For example, he wrote that it was difficult for him to find a woman intelligent, attractive and rich at the same time.¹ He also told his friend Kingsley Amis that sex annoyed him and that marriage revolted him, pointing to his preference for "strictly-monetary fornication"². Larkin also said that he preferred tossing himself off alone, in five minutes, and have the whole night for himself instead of 'wasting' his time and

¹ He wrote to a friend: "Took a girl out to tea twice recently. Oh Christ. Somewhere, somewhere, there *must* be a woman of combined intelligence& attraction. And money [...]" (SL, p. 57)

²*Selected Letters*, p. 63

money courting girls.¹ When to these statements, are added other arguments of his bleak and negative view, it becomes uneasy to see him otherwise. In “*Talking in Bed*” (TWW, CP100), for instance, communication is impossible between the man and his wife

Talking in bed ought to be easiest,
Lying together there goes back so far,
An emblem of two people being honest.

Yet more and more time passes silently.

And the speaker, in addition to the difficulty of finding words, is confronted with the difficulty of understanding the cause of this problem:

.....why
At this unique distance from isolation

It becomes still more difficult to find
Words at once true and kind
Or not untrue and not unkind.

This paradoxical situation made of communication becoming more difficult when it is supposed to be the easiest, and facing an insurmountable difficulty in finding words while one is not ‘isolated’ is, in reality, the ‘truth’. Larkin could have focussed on the ‘positive’ side of marriage and coupling, could have depicted the lying in bed in positive words. He would have averted thus the charges of negativity and nihilism. But he preferred to be sincere and tackle the existentialist problem of lack of communication, even in the situations considered to be most favourable. From this point of view, too, Larkin can be seen as a humanist. His valuation of being in close contact with others contrasts with his preference for isolation as he says:

I often wonder why people get married. I think perhaps they dislike being alone more than I do. Any one who knows me will not tell you that I am fond of company. I’m very fond of people, but it’s difficult to get people without company. (RW54)

¹He once told his friend Kingsley Amis: “I *don’t* want to take a girl out and spend *circa* £5 when I can toss myself off in five minutes, free, and have the rest of the evening to myself”. (Italics original, quoted in Diane Middlebrook, “*Where All the Ladders Start*”, *The Hudson Review*: 46, 4 (winter, 1994), 751-756, p. 751.)

Larkin is even more sincere when he insists on the difficulty for Man to be as generous as to be useful for others and give them more consideration than to himself. In “*Love*”, he depicts the existentialist dilemma of having to choose between being selfish enough or sufficiently generous. The paradox resides in the fact that in love, one is either selfish or unselfish, and the two situations are problematic because

The difficult part of love
Is being selfish enough,
Is *having the blind persistence*
To upset someone's existence
Just for your own sake.
What cheek it must take.

And then the unselfish side—
Who can be satisfied,
Putting someone else first,
So that you come off worst?
My life is for me.
As well deny gravity.

Still, vicious or virtuous,
Love suits most of us.
(...)
 (“*Love*”, Uncollected, CP180)

It is significant that love “suits” Man. However the inconveniences, it should exist. This binary view is also expressed in Larkin’s belief that “love collides very sharply with selfishness, and they are both pretty powerful things” (RW54). What is in fact pretty powerful is this collision from which stems something highly positive: generosity. True, Man is selfish, but he is able of “Unclosing like a hand” to “give for ever” (“*Solar*”, HW, CP.). Thus Larkin was also at least equally “positive” inasmuch as love and man-woman relationship was concerned. In letters to his friends he complained about his incapacity to have a good and satisfying relation with women. Passages like “I choke on such nutritious images” (“*LYLPA*”) relating to the photographs of a woman who yields the album to be seen by the speaker and “in every one there sleeps/ A sense of life lived according to love” (“*Faith Healing*”) contrast with those cited by the readers who find fault in Larkin as far as love is concerned. Moreover, in Larkin, love and sex permit “going down the long slide// To *happiness*, endlessly” (“*High Windows*”) (Emphasis mine). Here the speaker elicits

his conviction that a true life dictates rejecting religion. The happiness of love and sexual relations will carry, in its torrent, the priest and his fellowmen along the “long slide”:

...I wonder if
any one looked at me, forty years back,
And thought, That'll be the life;
No God any more, or sweating in the dark

About hell and that, or having to hide
What you think of the priest. He
And his lot will all go down the long slide
Like free bloody birds.

The last line of “*An Arundel Tomb*”--“What will survive of us is love”-- is one of the most positive. Here, too, Larkin makes a link between love and sincerity. The speaker starts by pointing to the insincerity of the earl and countess holding each other's hand dismissed as the sculptor's device rather than a true expression of a real feeling on the part of the couple. However this is one of the rarest “almost-instinct, almost true” thing: love. If “what will survive of us is love”, it is because the fact that despite all the falseness of man-woman relations, love is always there and does not disappear. In other poems, Larkin deals in an equally wonderful way with love. Life is driven by love as

...In everyone there sleeps
A sense of life lived according to love.
To some it means the difference they could make
By loving others, but across most it sweeps,
As all they might have done had they been loved.
That nothing cures.

(“*Faith Healing*”)

Similarly, love and sexual happiness makes the bride in “*Wedding Wind*” so excited that she feels so filled with energy that nothing could slow her excitement down. She even feels immortal thanks to love, and may be the joy of sex. Even death is not so sure to be capable of bringing to its end this new situation:

Can even death dry up
These new delighted lakes, conclude

Our kneeling as cattle by all-generous waters?

On the other hand, when there is no love, there is deception, depression, loneliness, isolation, flight from society as is shown in "*Ugly Sister*":

I will climb thirty steps to my room,
Lie on my bed;
Let the music, the violin, cornet and drum
Drowse from my head.

Since I was not bewitched in adolescence
And brought to love,
I will attend to the trees and their gracious silence,
To winds that move.

This means that in Larkin's poetry, love is synonymous with unending happiness. To remain faithful to experience and reality, Larkin considered also situations when love is problematic. He expresses a sense of responsibility in front of difficulties to carry on with sincere feelings. In "*Love, we must part now*", he writes:

Love, we must part now: do not let it be
Calamitous and bitter. In the past
There has been too much moonlight and self-pity:
Let us have done with it: for now at last
Never has sun more boldly paced the sky,
Never were hearts more eager to be free,
(.....)

There is regret. Always, there is regret.
But it is better that our lives unloose,
As two tall ships, wind-mastered, wet with light,
Break from an estuary with their courses set,
And waving part, and waving drop from sight.
(CP 29)

If the "last and truest humanism in art is the truthful expression of emotion, and this is something prior to all questions of politics: it concerns only the honesty or the corruption of our own consciousness."¹ Larkin can be said to be a humanist. Alan Munton is wrong when he says that "His ability to capture 'the feel of life' is,

¹ In Alan Munton, "*A Failed Humanism*", *Poetry Nation* Vol., N° 5, 1975, pp. 38-43.

compared to what he rejects in life, *only a limited humanism*”¹ (emphasis added). For, what Larkin captures is superior to what he rejects. He is interested in love, generosity, sincerity, concern for socialization. Furthermore what he seems to reject contributes to the shaping of an overall view of humanity, including its flaws. It is in fact by satirizing these flaws, and sometimes by rejecting them, that he succeeds to deliver a faithful image of Man. The problem with such criticism is that it wants the poet to be at the avant-garde of the cultural, and may be political, battle as Munton says:

Rather than take any cultural risks, they [the poets of *The New Review*] fall back upon a defence of Angus Wilson’s ‘decayed humanism’ — even though it resembles ‘an old bitch gone in the teeth’. The result has been much poor analysis, conducted in fiction and poetry of very limited value. ² (Emphasis mine)

But Larkin limited himself to being an artist concerned with Man’s experience of strong emotional moments. He was more concerned with “preserving” such experiences. Beyond recording these exceptional moments, he was able to make of these transitory moments of appreciation the ‘epiphanies’ of his poetry. He highlighted the ‘truth’ that such moments were always like lightning in the long dark nights of December, and in this dimension they could not be expected to last. Consequently, beyond this ‘sour’ truth, there is Man’s force and readiness to accept, or face it. The anthropocentrism must begin, for Larkin, with confronting one’s flaws and destroying the myths.

So contrarily to what some readers maintain, Larkin recognized the need and the worth of love in life. He believed however that Man should not be guided by his feelings alone. Consequently, the absence of Romantic profusions in his texts should not be interpreted as negation of love, but rather as a belief that there must be more interest in sincerity when dealing with emotions.

Larkin was also a man concerned with what he saw as a degradation of life. From the social point of view, he deplored the disappearance of the traditional life under the effect of modernization. In “*To the Sea*” the speakers rejoices at observing that the

¹ Ibid.

² Ibid.

practice of going to beach is “Still going on, all of it, still going on”. He recollects the pleasure of this “half an annual pleasure, half a rite,” as when he used to search the sand for cigarettes, and further back, when his parents “listeners/ To the same seaside quack, first became known”. But he is sorry to feel “strange to it now” as he watches

(...) the cloudless scene:
The same clear water over smoothed pebbles,
The distant bathers’ weak protesting trebles
Down at its edge, and the cheap cigars,
The chocolate-papers, tea-leaves, and, between

The rocks, the rusting soup-tins, (...)
(HW, CP 121-122)

This degradation was also environmental. Larkin showed, in fact, a strong concern with the degradation of the environment due to industrialization. In “*Going, Going*”, Larkin tells his deception at noticing that his hope is being contradicted:

I thought it would last my time—
The sense that, beyond the town,
There would always be fields and farms,
Where the village louts could climb
Such trees as were not cut down...

But these trees were cut down for the purposes of extending the town and gaining surfaces to build. This concern for preservation is confronted with the rising demands of society. For example, the young crowd in the M1 café is described as people whose “...kids are screaming for more—/ More houses, more parking allowed, / More caravan sites, more pay.” Inevitably

This has led to the conclusion that

Despite all the land left free
For the first time I feel somehow
That it isn’t going to last,

That before I snuff it, the whole
Boiling will be bricked in
Except for the tourist parts—

Larkin regrets here the disappearance of traditional England under the effect of modernization: “And that will be England gone,/ The shadows, the meadows, the lanes,/ The guildhalls, the carved choirs”(“*Going, Going*”) Terry Whalen sees in this perspective that “Larkin shared Lawrence’s lament for a fallen England, an England *dehumanized* by industrial pollution and commerce, and by the idolatry of materialism....”¹ (emphasis mine). This brings Philip Larkin close to Heidegger’s view that modernity, science and technology in particular, has negative consequences, if they cannot bring about that promised certainty. Technology has brought degradation, and doubt has not been dissipated.

His critical nostalgic expression of rootedness into the past is rendered through the valuation of the organic life. This way of life celebrated in poems like “*The Whitsun Weddings*”, “*To the Sea*”, “*Show Saturday*”, “*Church Going*”, and “*Going, Going*”. Larkin’s criticism of the present is perceived as the “organicist ideal”, in such texts as he felt that “Old England is erased by the new one, and the cost is a *diminution of all human worth*”² (emphasis mine). It is this diminution of human worth that is Larkin’s major concern in these texts. This concern makes him a humanist concerned with the fate of Man and humanity in general. Larkin’s interest and praise of pre-industrial England’s way of life is a concern for the preservation of the traditional way of life in a safer environment. It runs through his major collections of poetry under study here.

So, despite his claim that he lived at the periphery of things, Larkin was not so withdrawn from society and its concerns. He has shown humanist concerns for all that was to...Passages such as (“*Arundel Tomb*”), “be careful of each other while there is still time” (“*The Mower*”), “virtue is social”, “solitude is selfish”...contrast sharply with the previously quoted negative lines.

All the elements examined in this chapter contributed to giving rise to positive emotions, hope and uplifting utterances to confer to Larkin’s oeuvre an uplifting aspect. This positivity can be seen in many texts from his three major collections as well as in uncollected and unpublished poems. “*First Sight*”, for example, deals with difficulty succeeded by hope. It is made of two stanzas contrasting the present state of a depressingly bleak winter landscape with future happy expectations

¹ In “*Philip Larkin and Lady Chatterley’s Lover: Exploring an Influence*” . *New Larkins for Old*. James Booth, ed. P108.

²Ibid, p.110

through the prospect of forthcoming spring with its plenitude. The central idea of the poem is the contrast with apparently bad things or beginnings and what this turns to be afterwards. What first seems bad may prove to be very good indeed. The text focuses on young lambs' difficult start in an unfavourable environment. The difficult beginning is contrasted with positive expectations as spring is coming, bringing warmth and food. The lambs "Newly stumbling to and fro/ All they find, outside the fold,/ Is a *wretched width of cold*".(Emphasis mine). But They are

... waiting too,
Earth's immeasurable surprise.
They could not grasp it if they knew,
What so soon will wake and grow
Utterly unlike the snow.
(Emphasis added)

What is coming is so surprising that the lambs would not understand and believe it if they knew about it in the present despairing situation. Larkin leads here the reader from an extremely difficult situation to the prospect of an intensely hopeful one. Another poem where Larkin expresses a positive attitude is "*The Whitsun Weddings*".

In this diversely interpreted poem, he describes young couples, newly wedded, he sees at train stations as he travels from Hull to London. Quite dissimilar lives as his and theirs could be joined for a brief while by something as simple as a train ride. When the 'encounter' is finished he wonders how quickly "this frail / Travelling coincidence" disappeared. But while he occasionally is very cynical about these common people, the poem definitely ends on an uplifting note, though the final metaphor has been diversely interpreted:

[...] 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.
(*"Whitsun Weddings"*, TWW, CP 92)

It is significant that even in the most desolate situations; Larkin finds a possibility for hope. In his prose writings and speech, there are in Larkin passages that contradict the charge of negativism that so heavily weighs on his poetry. To a question of an interviewer about the “predominance” of negative statements in his poetry, Larkin, who shares the belief that “happiness writes white” (RW) answered:

People say I'm very negative, and I suppose I am, but the impulse for producing a poem is never negative; the most negative poem in the world is a very positive thing to have done.¹

This drive of finding something positive in a fundamentally negative scope is one of the main attitudes in Larkin. Through death, for example, he draws attention to life and this seems to proceed from a general postulate believing that obscurity may generate luminous wonder. This gives his poetry the characteristic trait of finding positivity in negativity conferring to his art a strong optimistic bent. There is in his poetry a strong consciousness of what is good in life. When he is coarse, it is to insist on the “silences” in the poem, the things not expressively told. For example, at first value, the following passage from “*This Be the Verse*” embodies the ‘Larkinesque’ negative worldview:

Man hands on misery to man.
It deepens like a coastal shelf.
Get out as early as you can
And don't have any kids yourself.
(HW, CP...)

However, this passage, apparently nihilist, bears a positive charge discernable only if interpreted as a warning to pay attention to the disasters the children might be submitted to through the inheritance of their parents’ evil. Humans should be responsible and conscious that their children might be subjected to ill-fate, doomed life. “Don’t have any kids yourself” should not be read independently from the context. The utterance is closely linked to the statement at the opening of the stanza: “Man hands on misery to man”. So, is it moral, humane to give birth to other

¹ Quoted in Jamie McKendrick, “*The Prose and Cons of Philip Larkin*”, *The Independent* (24 Oct 2001), (www.independent.co.uk). Larkin also wrote: “A good poem about failure is a success” (RW: 74).

innocents, in a miserable world? Larkin's answer, as can be seen in this poem, would be 'no'.

This contrast is best seen in lines such as "And the waves sing above the cemetery of waters". Here, as in other instances, beyond threat, danger, and sadness, there is something positive: above the cemetery, there is singing. This paradox is summed up as a "beautiful visions of hell"¹ by A.N. Wilson who, commenting "*Aubade*", finds "an authoritative music about the lines themselves, answering the organ-swell of religion". "What is extraordinary in this poem", he adds, "is the way Larkin makes such beautiful music out of such hell". Such was the beauty of Larkin's verse that at his funeral address, his friend Kingsley Amis said that "there always remained a mystery that the man we had known had written the poetry, which "this" had come from "that". This adds to the tension that characterizes Larkin's oeuvre. "This" being his humanism and "that" the despair that gave it rise.

Larkin's humanism transcends in fact the simple observation and recommendation of positive deed in order to insist on something more subtle. This subtlety may be found in the scorn of habits and clichéd "certainties" at times. In his treatment of communal events, Larkin aims at expressing the interest of the communion between the individual with his community. The self gets immersed in the community in "*The Whitsun Weddings*" and "*Faith Healing*" for example. In this respect Whalen reveals that Larkin, like Lawrence, advocates health of remaining spiritually awake to the "living organic connections" reminding us of Lawrence's: "...My individualism is really an illusion" pointing also to their sharing of the belief in the "beauty of festival events"² as is revealed in "*To the Sea*", "*Show Yesterday*", "*Whitsun Weddings*". If Whalen is right in saying that in his poetry post-*The Less Deceived*, Larkin's speakers realize they are part of a whole, and that there is an "otherness" to which they belong, he fails to see that this "otherness to which they belong" is an expression of a humanistic claim on the part of the poet. Furthermore, even in the chronology of Larkin's works, as Whalen says, we can see a maturing humanist claim. From the simple registration of communal events in several poems, to the realization of his personae that they are only part of a larger component, there

¹ A. N. Wilson, "Larkin's Beautiful Visions of Hell", (www.telegraph.co.uk.)

² Terrence Anthony Whalen, *Philip Larkin and English Poetry*, p. 81

is the humanist claim that Man needs his fellows to carry on the collective project of shaping humanity's destiny.

Written at a period marked with such events as the two World Wars and other major changes in society, Larkin's poetry could not be unconcerned with humanist issues. Furthermore some find him humanistic because he belonged to "The Movement" whose members believed in the necessity of keeping humanism alive. There is in Larkin's poetry the different aspects of the humanist thought. His rejection of all forms of systems and modernism in particular, as he believed that it inhibited and destroyed the harmonic audience-artist relation, pleads for his concern for the "ordinary people". What seem to be attacks on humanism can in fact be seen as a defence of humanism, whether with Sartre or Heidegger, and this may be applicable to Larkin. Larkin 'excessively' dealt with hopelessness, but this often ends in hope. If, like Blake, he can not be said to have been "conceptually systematic or even always consistent"¹. He is accused of having had sympathy with the Right, but this "prophet of political incorrectness" just thought that the Right was equated with some qualities and the Left with vices². In fact his chief concern was 'virtue versus vice'. Many have dwelt on his supposed empathy with Nazism, neglected that he clearly said, "I dislike Germans and I dislike Nazis, at least what I have heard of them"³.

¹ In William Lawson, "*Humanism in literature: William Blake*", *The Humanist*, Vol. 53, Issue 5, Sept-Oct 1993, p. 36+.

² He said: "I identify the Right with virtues, and the Left with vices" (RW, P....

³ See *Selected Letters*, p. 53

GENERAL CONCLUSION

In this dissertation I have attempted to show that Philip Larkin's poetry incorporates an existentialist content and that it is humanism-laden. To achieve this objective, special emphasis has been laid on the dichotomy "pessimism-optimism". This has permitted to explore the occurrence of the major existentialist themes and tenets in his texts. This content has been interpreted as a sign of humanism according to Sartre's theory that "Existentialism is Humanism".

Indeed Larkin employed Existentialism to render as faithfully as possible Man's predicament in the modern world. He handled the issue of pessimism in the same way the recognized Existentialist writers and thinkers did. In many of his poems, the individual is shown isolated and in need to choose and act in order to shape his own destiny. Very often, this feeling raises in him anxiety because, presumably, there follows the consciousness that while choosing for oneself, one chooses for the whole humanity. Moreover, this anxiety is aggravated by the consciousness that man is alone in a Godless universe with no moral values or standards to guide him.

If Existentialism is a philosophy that opposed every form of systems, because they were oppressive, then Larkin has much to share with this philosophy: He did not believe in religion, he denounced the inhibitions of some social practices, and gave the individual considerable weight in his writings. Like Sartre and Camus, he stressed Man's isolation and his paradoxical situations.

In addition, we have elicited instances where the individual depicts his routine life to insist on its absurd side. Embitterment, sadness, and dissatisfaction are among the other prevailing themes in Larkin's poetry. He even insisted, in some situations, on this pessimistic bent when dealing with supposedly happy events to convey the idea of the 'daffodils in deprivation'.

If his pessimism is linked to daffodils, it is because in the confrontation of two opposing principles, there is a profitable inspiration. When 'deprivation' is associated with 'daffodils' it is expected that optimism stem from pessimism. Thus in Larkin's poetry, there is the idea that from pessimism can rise optimism. In addition, this existentialist binary perception of life is broader: in Larkin's poetry, the isolated individual seeks sociability, and the insistence on loneliness serves to highlight the importance of the gregarious character of Man. Moreover while both nature and society seem indifferent, Man searches for a harmonious relation with natural and

social environment. Freedom, choice and action further reinforce the idea of the autonomy and centrality of man. Handling death in the way Larkin did it can be said to be intended to insist on the value of life. If his characters are scared by extinction, it is because they are attached to life.

The insistence on the bleak element of the dichotomy 'pessimism-optimism' is meant to highlight what is positive. If the 'negative' Larkin expressed himself through the density of the bleak and dark aspects of life, his counterpart, the positive Larkin gives expression to his view through the intensity of his arguments. Thus such passages and lines like "What will survive of us is love" (" *An Arundel Tomb* ") and "...we should be careful // Of each other, we should be kind / While there is still time" (" *The Mower* ") are highly positive statements denoting the poet's concern with Man's fate.

We have seen that "down-to-earth concerns" are one of the most apparent features of Larkin's texts. If it cannot be easily argued that Larkin is as systematic as to be declared to belong to any tradition, his concerns often meet those of the humanists and the existentialists. Although he is subjected to evil, Man is never compelled to do wrong and devalue Man's worth in Larkin. Though he sometimes leans on mysticism, Larkin avoids speaking of sin and the need for redemption in his texts: he does not depict, for instance, the "fall of humanity" after Adam and Eve's exile from Eden as described in the Bible. On the contrary, he depicts Man striving to find, or give, meaning to his life. This autonomous individual values his fellowmen: when he satirises them, it is only to show the baseness of some practices. Larkin, like the humanists in general, was deeply concerned with the access to art for the ordinary men. He thus strove to make poetry as simple as possible and he was interested in the daily ordinary life rather than in abstract affairs. In the tide of the Movement's aspirations, he could overcome his supposed intellectual elitism by being down-to-earth. It is through this paradoxical attitude and elements that Larkin could be said to come to humanism.

As can be seen, this study has not aimed at presenting Larkin as an optimistic poet. For, it would be much more interesting to consider the tension between experience and dream, hope and disillusion, pessimism and optimism --between "will and will's fulfilment". This debate is humanist in essence as far as it points to the insufficiencies of Man in order to find alternatives to the problematic aspects life. Even when the alternative is inexistent, the benefit would be to put Man face-to-face

with his flaws. The tension between hope and hopelessness, and fulfilment and disappointment is in fact an interest in the existentialist predicament of Man in an effort to find new possibilities for a meaningful life. Larkin was thus concerned with the 'hopelessness' of Man only to insist on the possibility of relief and escape from it. The structure of his poems very often reflect this concern as the generally open with a depiction of a simple event and finish with a beautiful generalization, as can be seen in "*Here*", "*High Windows*", and "*An Arundel tomb*".

As has been shown in Chapter 3, Larkin tackled the issue of humanism in different manners. His interaction with it ranges from a defence of its ideals to a denunciation of the attacks and assaults it underwent. In some texts, he regrets the loss of humanistic values. Even his supposed satire of the sexual revolution of the 1960s, through "*Annus Mirabilis*" for instance, can be read as an expression of an ache caused by the shift from the humanist values to a perversion of the hedonistic tendency in life. Some texts reflect indeed the idea that Larkin thought of this as anti-humanist and a dislocation of "values". A closer examination of his poems would reveal that he felt a serious threat on Humanism with the beginning of the 1960s when there occurred a radical change in the Western societies in general --a shift from traditional values to a more relaxed culture. Larkin condemned what he saw as a perversion of values. His attachment to the humanist values can, in addition, be seen in the incorporation, in some post-1960s poems, of humanist principles. This means that he continued to infuse in his poetry humanist ideals in order not to be limited to the denunciation of the degradations and to a kind of mourning.

To conclude, we can say that in Larkin's poetry Man is put at the centre of the universe. There is in his texts the belief in Man's potential for surpassing himself through free will, choice and action. In many texts, the individual strives to understand, to know the truth and find meaning to his actions and his life in general. Besides, Larkin's personae generally act to give significance to life. The worth and value of life and of Man is the theme of a number of poems as has been shown in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

We have seen that Larkin makes use of negative aspects in life to highlight the possibility of transforming them into something positive. His treatment of the theme of death for example permits a better valuation of life. Larkin is also humanistic by focussing on Man's qualities like the potential of love, generosity, sincerity, and the need and desire of communal life.

This Humanist bent can be further explored through a study of the humanist poetics in his poetry to consolidate the argument that generous enough was his humanism. An exploration of the poetics of wordplay through a study of the notions of irony, satire, parody, polysemy and ambiguity; the poetics of eloquence by looking deeper into the notions of rhetoric, argumentation, and logic in his texts; and the poetics of doubt and despair; as it can consider the tragic self-consciousness in Larkin's poetry to make a parallel for example between his statement that sexual intercourse began in nineteen sixty-three and that was late for him and Erasmus' exclamation "Immortal God! What world I see dawning: why can I not grow young again?"¹.

¹ Quoted in Arthur F. Kinney. *Humanist Poetics: Thought, Rhetoric and Fiction in Sixteenth Century England* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987), p. 3.

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Résumé

Cette étude entreprend d'étudier la manifestation de l'existentialisme et de l'humanisme dans la poésie de Philip Larkin. Elle a pour objectif de montrer que Larkin a non seulement incorporé un contenu existentialiste dans ses textes, mais en a fait usage pour renforcer une vision humaniste de la vie, telle que conçue par l'écrivain et philosophe français Jean Paul Sartre. L'existentialisme et l'humanisme sont discutés à la lumière de la prétendue négativiste vision de Larkin. Par conséquent, cette étude prend la notion de pessimisme comme point de départ pour montrer qu'au-delà de la vision pessimiste décelée dans la poésie de Larkin se trouvent des manifestations de la foi dans le potentiel de transcendance et de régénération.

Pour ce faire, cette étude part de la recherche de l'expression de thèmes existentialistes dans les textes de Larkin et interprète ensuite ce contenu comme étant un aspect d'une vision humaniste. La dialectique 'Existentialisme-Humanisme' que se propose d'explorer cette étude tient son origine de la dichotomie 'pessimisme-optimisme'. D'où la proposition d'étudier ici ces deux concepts (pessimisme et optimisme) non pas comme des éléments exclusifs, mais plutôt comme deux aspects d'une seule vision. Cela nous amène à voir dans ce regard une conception dualiste ayant pour soubassement philosophique l'Existentialisme.

Afin de mieux circonscrire sa thématique, cette étude s'intéresse moins à mettre à jour une quelconque influence directe de Sartre sur Larkin qu'à définir les points de convergence entre sa pensée et la philosophie existentialiste en général.

Mots-clés : Philip Larkin, Existentialisme, Humanisme, Pessimisme, Optimisme, Poésie, Liberté, Choix, Action, Anxiété, Temps, Mort, positivisme, Négativisme.

ملخص

تتناول هذه الدراسة أشكال التعبير عن الفلسفة الوجودية و الإنسانية في شعر فليب لاركن. وتهدف بذلك لتسليط الضوء على المحتوى الوجودي لشعر "لاركن" و كيفية توظيف هذا المحتوى للتعبير عن نظرة إنسانية للحياة بحسب نظرة الفيلسوف الفرنسي " Jean Paul Sartre". تقترح بذلك هذه الرسالة مراجعة للقراءات التي تصر على اتهامات التشاؤم والسلبية الموجهة للشاعر. وتشير الى ان الجانب المظلم لمنظوره ، كما يظهر في قصائده، ما هو إلا جزء من التصور المزدوج للحياة.

انطلاقا من التقابل "التشاؤم- التفاؤل"، تحاول هذه الدراسة أن تبين أن التشاؤم عند هذا ليس سوى جانب وجودي ، وبالتالي، انساني، للرؤية للحياة كما تصوره الفيلسوف والكاتب الفرنسي جان بول سارتر. من خلال دراسة السلبية المفترضة للاركن، يحاول هذا البحث الاستدلال بان قصائده تشتمل على محتوى وجودي. هذا ليس فقط لتقويض الحداثة من الداخل، كما يقترح البعض، وإنما لتعزيز وجهة نظر إنسانية للحياة.

تعتبر الثنائية " التوقع- التجربة " والنتيجة الطبيعية لها "الطم-الخيبة" احد التعبيرات الأكثر شيوعا للتشاؤم في نصوص لاركن.و يكشف هذا التوتر بين الأضداد الجانب الثنائي و المتناقض لكتاباتة. من خلال هذه المقابلات والتناقضات ، تبحث هذه الدراسة على أساس فلسفي لرؤية لاركن المبني على اساس الازدواجية وهو يتمثل في الوجودية. لكن بدلا من تحديد خطوط التأثير المباشر، تبحث هذه الدراسة في الصلات بين القصائد من جهة، والأفكار الوجودية والإنسانية من جهة أخرى.بالإضافة إلى استكشاف أطروحة سارتر أن " الوجودية إنسانية" ، فإن هذه الدراسة تسعى أيضا لإظهار كيف، بغض النظر عن لوجودية، يوجد هناك تعبير عن النزعة الإنسانية في شعر لاركن

الكلمات الدالة:

لاركن، الوجودية، الإنسانية، التشاؤم، التفاؤل، الحرية، الخيار، الحركة، الوقت، الموت، القلق، الايجابية، السلبية.