Philip Larkin and the Provincial Imperative : The solving emptiness that lies just under all we do (In Honour of Professor Fumio Miyahara On the Occasion of His Retirement)

Rawlings Peter

https://doi.org/10.15017/1354647

出版情報：英語英文学論叢. 47, pp.17-37, 1997-02. 九州大学英語英文学研究会
バージョン：
権利関係：

Philip Larkin and the Provincial Imperative

The solving emptiness that lies just under all we do [1]

Peter Rawlings

Many of the personae of Philip Larkin's poems, indeed the versions of himself socially and paratextually projected, have affinities with the John Kemp of *Jill*: a character who is socially confused, quickly embarrassed, sexually inept, if avaricious, and self-protectively provincial. At the beginning of the novel--and throughout, in every sense--John is cornered. As he makes the journey from Lancashire to Oxford, his diverse mortifications are focussed on what seem to him to be the excruciating social paraphernalia of eating sandwiches in a railway carriage initially chosen precisely because it was empty. In ways that anticipate later poetic strategies, wherever there is personal unease in the novel, it has territorial resonances, or displacements (here, the 'cold and deserted' landscape between Lancashire and Oxford):

> he looked anxiously at the other passengers to see if they were going to produce food themselves. They did not look as if they were. John had not travelled much before and for all he knew it was considered bad manners to eat in a public carriage. He tried to read. But at one o'clock he had grown desperate and had slunk along to the lavatory, where he locked himself in and bolted a few of his sandwiches before a furious rattling at the door made him cram the rest out of the ventilator, noisily flush the unused water-closet and go back to his seat.[2]

That poignant 'for all he knew' might serve as a gloss on, even as an epitaph for, Larkin. In a world where bitter humiliation is never less than latent, and discomposure always incessant, John returns to yet further

---

1. Philip Larkin, 'Ambulances', in *Collected Poems*, edited by Anthony Thwaite (London, 1988), pp. 132-133. Subsequently, the title of this collection will be abbreviated to CP and page references given in the text.
2. *Jill* (1946; London, 1975), p.22. Subsequent references will be given in the text.

lacerations:

> "Would you care for a sandwich, my boy?"
> The beat of the train obliterated some of her words, but her gesture was eloquent.
> "Er--no, thank you--it's very kind of you--no, thank you--I----"
> He could not explain that he had thrown his own lunch out of the lavatory window, and she continued to hold the bag out, shaking it determinedly (pp.22-23).

Symptomatically, John Kemp is perpetually besieged. If his resort, as here, is to the hermetic move, there is always that 'furious rattling at the door'. Available for recollection is a Larkin who would sooner leap out of the window than endure any discussion of his poetry with visiting academics. Or as he put it in an interview:

> I love all the Americans getting on to the train at King's Cross and thinking they're going to come and bother me, and then looking at the connections and deciding they'll go to Newcastle and bother Basil Bunting instead.[3]

For both John Kemp and Philip Larkin, the irresistible world of the incomprehensible other was ever proximate.[4]

John's detachment, his failures to connect (sexual or otherwise), and his social ignorance and isolation, are transferred to his registering of the external world through the barrier of the train window: both a separation and a means of problematic connection. Parataxis--the simple enumeration and juxtaposition of data, rather than their conjunction--is an appropriate medium for such a sensibility:

---

3. 'An Interview with the Observer' (1979), in Philip Larkin, *Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces 1955-1982* (London, 1983), pp.47-56 (p.54).
4. Perversely, the lavatory is 'unused'; it is tempting to connect this with Freud's 'castration complex' and the 'anal defiance' that he saw as constituting 'an important reaction on the part of the ego to demands by other people' (see Sigmund Freud, 'On Transformations of Instinct as Exemplified in Anal Erotism' (1917), in on Sexuality : *Three Essays on the Theory* of *Sexuality and Other Works*, The Pelican Freud Library, Vol. 7 (Harmondsworh, 1977), pp.295- (continued...)

He looked from the window and saw a man with a gun entering a field, two horses by a gate, and presently the railway line was joined by a canal, and rows of houses appeared.... The train clattered by iron bridges, cabbages and a factory painted with huge white letters he did not bother to read; smoke dirtied the sky; the train swung violently over set after set of points.... Then the eaves of the platform, hollow shouting, the faces slowing down as he dragged his heavy suitcase from the rack, the shuddering halt and escape of steam (pp.23-24).[5]

Problematically, there is a notional security in distracting detail, and consolations in the innominate and atomistic.

In the largely autobiographical 'I Remember, I Remember' (*CP*, pp. 81-82), the poet finds himself on a train that is unexpectedly diverted through Larkin's birthplace, Coventry. The poem offers a fulfilled childhood, the typical boyhood of a talented and precocious writer, only to parody it, withdrawing its very possibility. It gives Larkin the opportunity to define an early life entirely in negatives: here, among other things, his childhood was 'unspent', there was a family 'I never ran to when I got depressed', and any talents as a burgeoning poet went unrecognized. It is not a question, however, of blaming the place: 'Nothing, like something, happens anywhere'. 'Nothing' and 'something' amount to the same thing here: it takes more than the parenthetical marginalization of 'something'

(...continued)
302 (p.299) ; and 'Three Essays on Sexuality' (1905), in On Sexuality pp.125-126 (the latter draws attention to the relation between 'sexual satisfaction' and 'nourishment')). From this angle, John's situation can be interpreted as involving a perceived 'concentration of attention' on the part of the other passengers, this producing 'sexual excitation' ('On Sexuality', pp. 125- 126). The urge to eat his sandwiches, but the failure either to do that or to urinate or defecate, is symptomatic of John's sexual neuroses. Transposed into the desperate need for sandwiches is some kind of inchoate sexual desire that cannot be acknowledged or expressed. In part, this is supported by John's otherwise redundant concentration on the 'cream blouse' of the woman proffering sandwiches, and by his fear of being shifted to an 'open window', given 'smelling salts', and invited to 'lie down' (p.23).

5. Adumbrated here, in their sexual charge ('shuddering halt and escape of steam'), are the closing lines of that better known train journey in 'Whitsun Weddings': 'And as the tightened brakes took hold, there swelled / A sense of falling, like an arrow-shower / Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain' (CP, p. 116).

to detach it from a 'nothing' whose similitude with it is announced by that corrosive 'like'. 'Nothing', then is something that happens; it is a type of experience like any other, only more substantial perhaps; and calculating for it, even celebrating it poetically, can be regarded as a way of anticipating and preparing for failure of a kind, and even death.

John Kemp in *Jill* and the persona of 'I Remember, I Remember'--in their isolated, uneventful, and negative lives--seem to correspond closely with aspects of Larkin's own life and work. Philip Larkin was born in Coventry in 1922, went up to Oxford between 1940 and 1943, and became a librarian at a small public library in Shropshire. Subsequently, he had librarian posts at Leicester and Belfast before being appointed as Librarian at the University of Hull in 1955, a position he held until his death in 1985. Coventry, in the phrase 'sent to Coventry', is proverbially associated with being isolated, shunned, or exiled.[6] Oxford, like Cambridge, is still regarded by many as insular, anachronistic, and fossilized. Shropshire, Leicester, and certainly Hull, are all backwaters from a metropolitan point of view, and Belfast, not even English, has for long been problematically related to Britain. Larkin abhorred the idea of travelling, especially abroad. 'I have never travelled since I was about 16', he wrote; 'a few visits to Germany left hardly any impression: for vivid impressions I prefer England'.[7] Famously, when asked whether he would like to visit China, Larkin replied: 'I wouldn't mind seeing China if I could come back the same day'.[8] Travelling, for Larkin, had too many homologies with the

6. The phrase 'to send to Coventry', according to the OED, means to 'exclude ... from society' on 'account of objectionable conduct; to refuse to associate or have intercourse with such a person'. A potential origin is in Edward Hyde Clarendon's *The History of the Rebellion and Civil Wars in England* (1647) : 'Bromingham' [Birmingham] , is a 'town so generally wicked that it had risen upon small parties of the King's, and killed or taken them prisoners and sent them to Coventry [Coventry being a pro-parliamentary town] (Vol. 6, p.83). A similar derivation is given in Brewer's *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, revised by Ivor H. Evans (London, 1970), p.270.

7. Letter to Alan Pringle, 4 March 1947; Anthony Thwaite, editor, *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin: 1940-1985* (London, 1992), p. 137.

passage of time. He avoided the former, and developed a calcifying routine in an attempt to arrest the latter:

> My life is as simple as I can make it. Work all day, then cook, eat, wash up, telephone, hack writing, drink and television in the evenings. I almost never go out. I suppose everyone tries to ignore the passing of time: some people by doing a lot, being in California one year and Japan the next; or there's my way--making every day and every year exactly the same. Probably neither works.[9]

Then there is the business of being a librarian. Librarians have a reputation for eccentricity: they inhabit a cloistered world and are obsessively concerned with orderliness, accumulation, and retention (on the whole, life would be better without readers and borrowers rather than with the potential plenitude of chaotic life). A library is the perfect place, in fact, for an anal retentive. Undoubtedly, Larkin had a close relationship, indeed a permanent honeymoon, with libraries: 'the dear old Library', he wrote adoringly, 'embraces me like a bride daily'.[10] At one point, the narrator in *Jill* looks at the 'tree tops in the wind' and exclaims: 'What control could he hope to have over the maddened surface of things?' (p.243). If the railway journey--with its vacillation between movement and stasis, contact and isolation, purpose and a sense of drifting--was Larkin's metaphorical soulmate, then more palpably so was the library. There, he could engage in what he called 'patrol activity' in his 'small world'.[11]

The smallness of that world limits, for some critics, the reach and significance of the poetry. For these readers, Larkin's poems are not only provincial in content, but in conception and idiom. Central to this critique is what is seen as Larkin's all-consuming preoccupation with urban trivia, the general tedium and futility of life and, more bleakly, extinction,

---

8. 'An Interview with the Observer' (1979), in Required Writing, pp.47-56 (p.55).
9. 'An Interview with *Paris Review*' (1982), in *Required Writing*, pp.57-76 (pp.57-58).
10. Letter to Judy Egerton, 8 April 1973, in *Selected Letters*, p.477.
11. Letter to J.B. Sutton 15 January 1946, in *Selected Letters*, p.114.

oblivion, and death. The poet and critic Charles Tomlinson has been at the forefront of this kind of attack; his views were first expressed in 1957:

poetry... can only be renewed by poets whose sensory organisation is alive, who are aware to the fingertips of the universe around them and who have broken through the suburban mental ratio which too many of the movement poets attempt to impose on their experience.[12]

This view went largely unmodified in an essay written by Tomlinson more than twenty-five years later. The 'deliberate narrowing' of poets like Larkin has been merely an excuse for 'the British Philistine' and such

narrowness suits the English perfectly. They recognize their own abysmal urban landscapes, skilfully caught with just a whiff of English films c. 1950.[13]

Alvarez described the overall feel of Whitsun Weddings as that of 'post-war provincial England in all its dreariness'; and Christopher Miller, even more acerbically, contends that 'Larkin is a mediocrity'. He goes further:

I object to nothing in Larkin of poetry, sneering poetry though it may be. I object to bad poetry, to repetition and routine, to petty verse. [14]

Typically, John Betjeman remarked that Larkin was 'the John Clare of the building estates'. [15] For Robert Conquest, on the other hand, 'insularity'

---

12. Charles Tomlinson, 'Letter to the Editor', *Essays in Criticism*, 7 (1957), p.460; this letter followed his earlier article, 'The Middlebrow Muse', *Essays in Criticism*, 7 (1957), p.215.
13. Charles Tomlinson, 'Some Aspects of English Poetry Since the War', in *The Present*, The New Pelican Guide to English Literature, Vol. 8, edited by Boris Ford (Harmondsworth, 1983), pp.450-470 (pp.450-451, 457-458).
14. Christopher Miller, 'The Egotistical Banal, or Against Larkintudinising', *Agenda*, 21, No.3 (Autumn, 1983), pp.69-103 (pp.68, 102).
15. Quoted in Peter Macdonald Smith, 'The Postmodernist Larkin', *English*, 38 (1989), pp.153-161 (p.153).

is one of the strengths of Larkin's poetry, signifying a resolve to base himself firmly in the experience, the language, the culture which have formed him, in which he is rooted.[16]

Similarly, R.P. Draper more or less takes it for granted that Larkin is a provincial rather than a metropolitan poet: his 'cultural anchorage' is there.[17] John Press argues that the 'derogatory' sense of 'provincial--a limited, narrow, imperfectly civilized, mentally restricted, and emotionally underdeveloped world'--does not apply to a Larkin for whom 'provincialism' means a concern 'with the values of his own cultural society' and a productive indifference towards 'what lies beyond the world that he knows at first-hand'. This involves, above all, a commitment to 'sincerity of feeling, fidelity to the truth as he conceives it... and a keen nose for anything that smacks of cultural snobbery'.[18] J.R. Watson concludes that the label 'provincial' takes neither detractors nor admirers far enough:

It might be better to ask whether Larkin's poetry is not much more than an ordinary view of provincial England; whether it is not rather concerned with fundamental human longings and imperfections, with man's dimly-felt needs in an inimical age.[19]

Certainly, Larkin did not disavow the category of provincialism. He referred to himself as a 'provincial' in an essay on Anthony Powell and further suggested that

poets write for people with the same background and experiences as themselves, which might be taken as a compelling argument in support of provincialism.[20]

---

16. Robert Conquest, 'A Proper Sport', in *Larkin at Sixty,* edited by Anthony Thwaite (London, 1982), p.32.
17. R.P Draper, 'Philip Larkin: the Provincial Poet', in *The Literature of Region and Nation,* edited by R.P. Draper (London, 1989), pp.81-92 (p.82).
18. John Press, *Rule and Energy: Trends in British Poetry Since the Second World War* (London, 1962), pp.90-91.
19. J.R. Watson, 'The Other Larkin', *Critical Quarterly*, 17 (1975), pp.347-360 (pp.359-360).

There was an extent, too, to which Larkin regarded himself as a Hull poet. To Betjeman, he wrote: 'I don't think that there are any local poets in this part of the world'. There is evidence in a slightly later letter, though, of an interest in his own position within a local genealogy:

> Further to my letter of 16th December, I visited the City Library this morning and looked through their three or four shelves of volumes of verse with local associations... And of course over all looms the enormous shadow of Marvell.[21]

Larkin's cultivation of stasis and exclusion, and his appropriation and celebration of restriction and limitation, were closely allied to discursive forms of enclosure, framed vantage-points, and distanced experience.[22] In 'Here' and 'Whitsun Weddings', for instance, railway travel is the vital mitigation. On trains, the poet could sit in recession, sometimes illusorily protected from the need for an involvement with things external; he could observe without necessarily being observed, momentarily suspended yet moving on; he could travel along side, but not with, his fellow passengers. Elsewhere, from the perspective of high windows--more often than not, the top floor of the Brynmor Jones Library, Hull University, with its view of a huge hospital, the crematorium, various cemeteries, the river and beyond--Larkin could attempt to process the detritus of modern life and death. Suspended and detached, aloof and uninvolved, Larkin occasionally bewailed his position. His ambivalence over inclusion and exclusion, or participation and passive detachment (usually hinging on a preposterous belief in the importance, as distinct from the significance, of sexual intercourse), is evident in 'Reasons for Attendance' (*CP*, p. 80). From his habitual situation, outside, the poet peers into the dancing world beyond.

---

20. 'Mr Powell's Mural', in *Required Writing*, pp.219-224 (p.220); 'An Interview with *Paris Review* : in *Required Writing*, pp. 57-76 (p. 69).
21. 'Letters to John Betjeman, 16 December 1976 and 23 December 1976, in *Selected Letters*, pp.554-556.
22. As Andrew Motion expresses it: 'every time he reached out of his solitude he felt his integrity was threatened'; *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life* (London, 1993), p. 157.

He rationalizes his isolation, in a wearily predictable way, in terms of 'art'. But the poem ends in confusion, even contradiction:

> 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 urban solitariness, Larkin discovered the variety of alchemy necessary for that sublime--however inverted and, occasionally, parodic--that controls much of his writing. With it came a technique, of bewildering power, for transmuting into poetry what then only appears to be the merely nugatory. The poetic intensity engendered by Hull inflected even his most casual-seeming observations:

> As for Hull, I like it because it's so far away from everywhere else... It's in the middle of this lonely country, and beyond the lonely country there's only the sea. I like that [23].

'Money', however slight a poem, is typical of Larkin's wonderful way with base metals and gold: its final sentence organizes a poignant modulation of the whole, and a retrospective configuring of a specious aimlessness:

> I listen to money singing. It's like looking down
> From long French windows at a provincial town,
> The slums, the canal, the churches ornate and mad
> In the evening sun. It is intensely sad. (*CP*, p. 198)

Many of Larkin's poems are teleological: their in-forming 'sudden vision', that is to say, often strikes terminally.[24]

Larkin much admired a now forgotten novel by Julian Barnes, *The*

23. 'An Interview with the Observer'; *in Required Writing* pp.47-56 (p.54).
24. 'A poem is written because the poet gets a sudden vision--lasting one second or less-and he attempts to express the whole of which the vision is a part'; Letter to J. B. Sutton, 28 December 1941; quoted in Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin:A Writer's Life*, p.72.

Senior Commoner, not least because of the way in which he saw it as trading in 'circumstantial irrelevancy':

> Nearly every scene is diversified with details that do not relate to it: background sights and sounds, pointless pieces of information, hints that lead nowhere.

This technique of using

> trivialities to suggest that other lives are going on simultaneously, and that even the lives we are shown have other dimensions

is adopted extensively in 'Whitsun Weddings', 'Here', and a good many other poems.[25] In provincial Hull, in particular, Larkin seemed free from metropolitan portentousness, with its scant hues of the substantial. The material of his experience, thin and aggregated rather than textured and congregated, fostered poems that appear to revel in desultory negativity and drifting inventory:

> Here domes and statues, spires and cranes cluster
> Beside grain-scattered streets, barge-crowded water,
> And residents from raw estates, brought down
> The dead straight miles by stealing flat-faced trolleys,
> Push through plate-glass swing doors to their desires--
> Cheap suits, red kitchen-ware, sharp shoes, iced lollies,
> Electric mixers, toasters, washers, driers-- (*CP*, p. 136)

---

25. 'The Traffic in the Distance', in *Required Writings*, pp.274-277 (pp.276-277). Julian Hall's *the Senior Commoner* (1933) was 'one of the few dozen books' Larkin kept in his bedroom to be 'read at any time' (*Required Writing*, p.274). As part of his fascination with the railway motif, Larkin begins his essay by quoting the novel's arousing (Larkin's word for it, establishing affinities with the erotic ending of 'Whitsun Weddings') conclusion: 'The train was five minutes late in arriving. The lights of the station burned dimly in the fog. Harold opened the door of the carriage and the girl stepped out. Rowland took down his suitcase from the rack. A porter strolled up. The traffic in the distance had a muffled sound' (p.274).

But Larkin's strategy--especially his fragile, and equivocal, locating of epiphanies in the world of the intensely quotidian--has familiar antecedents. Wordsworth's 'spots of time' with their 'renovating virtue', for example, arose 'In trivial occupations, and the round/Of ordinary intercourse'; 'Such moments/Are scattered everywhere'.[26] Triviality and life's scatterings are at the centre of Larkin's poetic project. Like the lambs born into the snow in 'First Sight', the prospect for Larkin's readers is that 'Hidden round them, waiting too', is 'Earth's immeasurable surprise' (*CP*, p. 112).

Whereas Walt Whitman expected the ordinary to yield the extraordinary (and Larkin's inventories of the everyday owe more than a little to Whitman), for Larkin it is more a matter of desperate hope. There is much in Larkin of Whitman's confident discovery of the poetic in the prosaic and provincial:

> The greatest poet hardly knows pettiness or triviality. If he breathes into any thing that was before thought small it dilates with the grandeur and life of the universe.[27]

There is also something of the (American) Puritan narrative in Larkin's version of this quest: painful journeys culminate in moments of orgiastic, even orgasmic, escape, leaving the poem suspended between life and death, and the reader contemplating the notional, arbitrary line between the two. Whatever scope there is for negotiation over the concept of 'epiphanies', Colin Falk's position on Larkin is entirely untenable: 'Larkin has probably captured the feel of life as it is for a great many ordinary people, but he has done it ultimately at the expense of his own poetry'; the poems are bathed in a general sense of 'wistfulness; but are without

26. William Wordsworth, *The Prelude, or Growth of a Poet's Mind; An Autobiographical Poem*, Book XII, Lines 213-214 & 223-224 (1805; London, 1850 edition); reprinted in *Wordsworth: Poetical Works*, edited by Thomas Hutcheson (1904), revised edition (Oxford, 1969), p.577.

27. Walt Whitman, 'Preface to Leaves of Grass' (1855); reprinted in *Walt Whitman: The Complete Poems*, edited by Frances Murphy (Harmondsworth, 1975), pp.742-762 (p.746).

'epiphanies'.[28]

There is a plethora of epiphany in Larkin's poetry; although what the reader does with it is, as ever, an altogether different matter.[29] The 'arrow-shower' at the end of 'Whitsun Weddings' (*CP*, p. 116) has its counterpart in the 'luminously-peopled air' and 'the unfenced existence' of 'Here' (*CP*, pp. 136- 137). Similarly, 'Water' is a comparatively innocuous poem about the role of water in life and religion; until, that is, its dazzling final stanza:

> And I should raise in the east
> A glass of water
> Where any-angled light
> Would congregate endlessly (*Cp*, p.93).

Towards the end of 'Mr BIeaney'--a prosaic account of lodging in other people's space, of squatting--there is a searing elevation, to a point higher even than Wordsworth's Mount Snowden, as the poet speculates about whether the previous occupant of the room 'stood and watched the frigid wind/Tousling the clouds' (*CP*, p. 102). In Wordsworth's 'The Prelude' of course, Mount Snowden is where the poet discovers not only 'A fixed, abysmal, gloomy, breathing-space', but also

> the emblem of a mind
> That feeds upon infinity, that broods
> Over the dark abyss, intent to hear
> Its voices issuing forth to silent light
> In one continuous stream.[30]

'Friday Night in the Station Hotel', again set in Hull, surveys the lonely

---

28. Colin Falk, 'Philip Larkin' (1964), reprinted in *Twentieth Century Poetry: Critical Essays and Documents*, edited by Graham Martin and P.N. Furbank (Milton Keynes, 1975), pp.403-411 (pp.409-410).
29. Relevant here is Andrew Motion's comment about the combination of the 'demotic and rarefied' in Larkin's poetry; *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life*, p.57.

silence of a hotel mostly occupied only on weekdays by businessmen. There is little preparation for a rhapsodic final line that evokes Larkin's own 'dark abyss': *Now/Night comes on. Waves fold behind villages'* (*CP*, p. 163).[31] For Larkin, as for Wordsworth, such 'solitary ecstasies' were ever the pursuit.[32]

'High Windows' (*CP*, p. 165), like 'Here', terminates in the realms of the 'untalkative', of silence; similarly, the 'bluish neutral distance' of 'Here' becomes the 'deep blue air'. In both poems, a hypnotic poise is achieved by deliberate and unresolvable ambiguity. In 'High Windows', that final 'endless' can rehabilitate the whole poem, or it can consign life to oblivion, to a beyond that is 'out of reach' in 'Here':

> 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.

Larkin's poetic creed is clearly in evidence here:

> my prime responsibility is to the experience itself, which I am trying to keep from oblivion for its own sake... the impulse to preserve lies at the bottom of all art.[33]

Both 'High Windows' and 'Here', in different ways, bear out Christopher Ricks's observation that 'Larkin's poems do not expire'.[34] By the time of the much later 'Aubade', luminous opaqueness, ambiguous journeys, and

---

30. Book XIV, lines 58 & 70-72, in *Wordsworth: Poetical Works*, p.584. Larkin's 'sun, untalkative, out of reach' ('Here', CP, p.137) is not that distantly related to Wordsworth's 'silent light/In one continuous stream'.
31. The italics are Larkin's. He approved of Dylan Thomas and Vernon Watkins because they 'were both ... aiming at ecstasy'; 'Vernon Watkins: An Encounter and a Re-encounter', *in Required Writing*, pp.40-44 (p.41).
32. Referring to his 'Grandad' in a letter to his mother (30 June 1946), Larkin wrote: 'how much of a descendant of him I feel sometimes, with his bald head and solitary ecstasies'; quoted in Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life*, p.3.
33. 'Statement', in *Required Writing*, p.79.

subverting epiphanies have been replaced by stark light, an inevitable journey whose destination is only too clear, and an unregenerable bleakness. In this poem, the signifiers 'here' and 'nothing' are as unproblematically attached to their signifieds as lids to coffins. 'Unresting death' is a 'whole day nearer now':

> The mind blanks at the glare. Not in remorse
> --The good not done, the love not given, time
> Torn off unused--nor wretchedly because
> An only life can take so long to climb
> Clear of its wrong beginnings, and may never;
> But at 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 (*CP*, p.*208*).

For many, Larkin's long and ultimate sojourn in Hull is emblematic of his stifling provincialism.[35] He delighted in mocking it but was, nevertheless, immensely proud of the university library, over whose construction he had presided. When expressing, at times, a sense of loathing for Hull, there is a strong element of self-hatred, certainly self-deprecation: for he

---

34. Christopher Ricks, 'Like Something Almost Being Said', i*n Larkin at Sixty*, p. 120.
35. Hull (more properly, 'Kingston-upon-Hull) was a thriving and powerful town in the later mediaeval period and beyond. During the English Civil War, a large arsenal was located there; and some historians believe that Hull's denying Charles I entry was the decisive moment of the war. Something of a radical stronghold, Hull was the only town to erect a monument to William of Orange (it still stands). The town has always been famous for poets: Andrew Marvell (1621-1678) was born nearby (at Winestead) and educated there. Whilst I was at Hull University (1978-1981), where I met Philip Larkin on a number of occasions and was tutored by Andrew Motion (then a lecturer in the English Department), there was a triumvirate of poets: Philip Larkin, Andrew Motion, and Douglas Dunn. Hull is also famous for spawning William Wilberforce (1759-1833), the philanthropist who was prominent in the campaign for the abolition of slavery (which succeeded in 1807). Lord Wilberforce, the great-great grandson of William Wilberforce, conferred my Hull degree in his capacity as Chancellor of the University.

felt himself to be at one with so many of its characteristics. He wrote: 'I wish I could think of just one nice thing to tell you about Hull--oh yes, well, it's nice & very flat for cycling: that's about the best I can say'.[36] 'What a place to build a town', he later lamented.[37] In an early letter, however, it is clear that he found the mingling of land, urban and rural, and sea poetically promising:

> The corn waves, the sun shines on faded dusty streets, the level-crossings clank, bills are made out for 1957 under billheads designed in 1926, and the adjacent water shifts and glitters, hinting at Scandinavia... That's a nice piece of evocation for you.[38]

Hull is a terminus; no-one ever passes through it; it is 'on the way to nowhere', as Larkin wrote.[39] The importance of the city is in its past: it is no longer the sea-port it was; and from the 1960's, its population and industry has steadily declined. Hull is not in the north and is some way from the Midlands. One river, the Humber, isolates it from the south--but for the world's largest, single-span suspension bridge--and another, the River Hull, bisects the city in two. Just to the east lies the flat plain of Holderness and beyond it, the grey, uninviting and yet, for Larkin, alluring expanse of the North Sea.

Without question, Philip Larkin saw Hull as occupying, geographically and metaphorically, a liminal position. This was as far from the metropolitan as one could be without becoming extinct; and the whole place, like life, seemed on the brink of nothing. The final stretch of the railway line from the south runs parallel to, and within metres, of the River Humber; and this surreal convergence of land, sky, river, and railway track is captured in 'Whitsun Weddings' as the poet travels out

---

36. Letter to Ansell and Judy Egerton, 26 July 1955; *Selected Letters*, p.246.
37. Letter to Judy Egerton, 10 February 1956; Selected Letters, p.257. It is difficult to square these various remarks with Andrew Motion's 'Larkin settled into the habit of praising Hull'; *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life*, p.250.
38. Letter to Judy Egerton, 28 May 1957, *in Selected Letters*, p.276.
39. Letter to Donald Hall, 9 June 1956, *in Selected Letters*, p.263.

of Hull:

> We ran
> Behind the backs of houses, crossed a street
> Of blinding windscreens, smelt the fish-dock; thence
> The river's level drifting breadth began,
> Where sky and Lincolnshire and water meet (*CP*, p. 114).

In Hull and its environs, the substantial, or corporeal, intersects with the insubstantial, the incorporeal.

As the poem 'Here' demonstrates, Hull's abiding attraction for Larkin was in its perceived proximity to earthly versions of mesmerizing 'oblivion'. In 'Here', places are specified but not named; ultimately, even the specification is lacking. The relation, in the poem, between the signifier 'here' and its three signifieds is revealing. The domain of the first 'here' is a large town:

> Here domes and statues, spires and cranes cluster.

and the place is populated by

> 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;

that of the second:

> Fast-shadowed wheat-fields, running high as hedges,
> Isolate villages, where removed lives
>
> Loneliness clarifies. Here silence stands
> Like heat.

The third, and final, domain is neither named nor articulated:

And past the poppies bluish neutral distance
Ends the land suddenly beyond a beach
Of shapes and shingle. Here is unfenced existence:
Facing the sun, untalkative, out of reach.

These three domains seem distinct; but they are rendered equivalent by that three-fold repetition of 'here'. Specific senses of 'Here', and actual experiences of place, dissolve. 'Here'--as the poem basks in the adverbial suspense and boundless deixis of the word--is anywhere and nowhere, the latter being the more substantial of the two for Larkin. The 'harsh-named halt' of the poem's first section is proleptic of, and corresponds with, the 'terminate' 'pastoral' of the town, the clarifying loneliness of the coastline and, finally, 'unfenced existence'. The journey that structures the poem is from 'rich industrial shadows', through a curious but unarresting urban scene reminiscent of a hospice, to rural solitude and the edge of oblivion, if not beyond. The inevitability of the destination, and the relentless momentum of the journey, are dramatized by an opening sentence that is twenty-five lines long. This sentence comes to rest, appropriately enough, on 'Loneliness clarifies'. 'I find', Larkin wrote, 'that with the absence of other people one becomes more sensitive to things that make for poetry'.[40] In this poem, once the loneliness has clarified, prosaic reportage gives way to intense poetry.

The purposefulness of the initial 'swerving' is undermined by its triplication:

Swerving east, from rich industrial shadows
And traffic all night north; swerving through fields
Too thin and thistled to be called meadows,
And now and then a harsh-named halt, that shields
Workmen at dawn; swerving to solitude.

Swerving in certain directions ('east' and 'through fields') amounts to the

40. Letter to Patsy Strang, 1 November 1953, *in Selected Letters*, p.216.

same thing as 'swerving to solitude'. 'Swerving' implies an avoidance of danger; this is the impetus for this journey of metropolitan escape; and for Larkin's poetry, let alone his life, 'swerving' is the defining condition. At one level, the urban centre in 'Here' is under siege from its life-cancelling beyond in the same way that death can be seen as blockading life. In this poem, however, the 'beyond' is, at the same time, both threatening and irresistible. The poem's closure, even if merely nominally, entertains therapeutic isolation, creativity, and extinction. That phrase 'out of reach' positions death in terms of its immediate, yet problematic, proximity to life. But it also refers both to the poet at the end of his journey and the 'unfenced existence' that he seeks and can only secure, or not, as that 'unfenced' (disembodied) implies, in death.

Inescapably, life entails living of a kind; whereas reclusiveness and exclusion are forms of death.[41] For Larkin, that unpopulated east coast, on the threshold of the bleak North Sea, uncertainly represented a sublime equilibrium and a post-ultimate encounter. It was a place in which the putative opposition between life and death could become an ephemeral coalescence, if predicated only on poetic ambiguity. Simultaneously, and incoherently, what Larkin saw as a Hull barely vital, together with its undertow of infinite extinction in the form of that vast, storm-tossed sea beyond, acted as a grim *memento mori*. In Hull, that is, Larkin felt close to that 'solving emptiness/That lies just under all we do' ('Ambulances' *CP*, pp. 132-33). Axiomatic for Larkin was Samuel Butler's observation that

41. The antithetical, yet symbiotic, relation between 'life' and 'death', and a good many of the paradoxes and ambivalences that follow thereby, were not lost on Victorian writers with a scientific cast of mind: 'The most absolute life contains death, and the corpse is still in many respects living'; Samuel Butler, *The Way of all Flesh* (1903; Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1947), p. 113.

sensible people get the greater part of their own dying done during their own lifetime.[42]

I think that any move in the direction of collapsing Larkin's specifl-cities in these poems should be resisted. Andrew Motion, for instance, sees 'Ambulances' as 'modestly and devoutly' collecting 'evidence of ordinary life to create a truth which can be universally acknowledged'.[43] Perhaps; as long as the urgent and continuing realization is that nothing, for Larkin, was more local, provincial, and sharply focussed than Hull and death. In 'The Old Fools', Larkin compares death with birth:

> It's only oblivion, true:
> We had it before, but then it was going to end,
> And was all the time merging with a unique endeavour
> To bring to bloom the million-petalled flower
> Of being here (*CP*, p. 196).

The poem 'Here' can be regarded as Larkin's own 'unique endeavor' to commemorate, rather than celebrate, that 'million-petalled flower' of being here', of being, quite simply, in Hull.[44]

The clear topographical correspondence with Hull and its environs is suggested alliteratively in the poem 'Here' ('Here' and 'Hull'); and tellingly, Hull is regularly discussed in terms of negatives in Larkin's writings. In his essay 'A Place to Write', connections are implied between Coventry, Hull, poetry, and nothingness by the organizing of a resonance between the final line of 'I Remember, I Remember' ('Nothing, like something,

42. Samuel Butler, *The Way of All Fresh*, Ch.24, p. 131.
43. Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin: A Writers' Life*. Similarly, Motion regards 'Dockery and Son' as rising from its 'authenticating details to spell out general truths' (p.334). I would want to construe Larkin much more as a 'romantic materialist', to borrow a phrase from Gillian Beer's *Darwin's Plots: Evolution Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (London, 1983), p. 139.
44. An experience that involved much more than a clash between 'the longing to escape' and the 'need to stay put'; Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin: A Writers' Life*, p.34.

happens anywhere, *CP*, p.82), and the first line of the essay: 'Poetry, like prose, happens anywhere'. In effect, this essay is a prose version of 'Here'. For the line 'Gathers to the surprise of a large town' (*CP*, p. 136), for instance, there is a description of Hull as a 'modern city lodged unexpectedly in the triangle of flat country between the Humber and the North Sea'. The 'unfenced existence', the beyond, of 'Here', is akin to that 'an end-of-the-line sense of freedom':

> For a place cannot produce poems; it can only not prevent them, and Hull is good at that. It neither impresses nor insists. When your train comes to rest in Paragon Station against a row of docile buffers, you alight with and end-of the-line sense of freedom.

and also in a description of what lies beyond, yet near:

> Behind Hull is the plain of Holderness, lonelier and lonelier, and after that the birds and the lights of Spurn Head, and then the sea. One can go ten years without seeing these things, yet they are always there, giving Hull the air of having its face half-turned towards distance and silence, and what lies beyond them.[45]

Diastolic nothingness--death, and endless oblivion--and systolic life: this is the choric rhythm of much of the poetry; in Hull and what is not beyond, Larkin discovered its terrestrial homologies. Hull on the threshold of a seemingly infinite beyond, as a place barely within the pale, was analogous for Larkin to his sense of life as always and already on the brink of death.

Larkin's poetry is not 'provincial' in that it passively acquiesces in a sense of comfortable restriction, confinement, and narrowness; neither is it provincial in that it deliberately--consistently, at least--sets out to

45. 'A Place to Write', *in Philip Larkin, 1922-1985: A Tribute*, edited by George Hartley (London, 1988), p.74.

46. Larkin, in an obituary on Eric White, mobilized this opposition between the 'metropolitan' and the 'provincial': 'Eric was my first introduction to "metropolitan literature", and it amused him to startle my provincial attitudes'; Letter to Blake Morrison, 16 October 1985, *in Selected Letters*, p.755.

take arms against the metropolitan.[46] Above all, this poetry focusses on the problematics of provinciality; it is its very texture and substance. The energetic, always perplexing, dialectic is between the provincial and the metropolitan, between, that is, stasis and restless movement, confinement and escape, observation and participation, isolation and communality, detachment and involvement, distance and proximity and, ultimately, death and life. Life is an affair of boundaries, limits, restrictions, and dense circumstance, while death is the sublime negation of all these. To prefer one, not that choice can be the issue, is to defer the other; and to accept the consequences of doing so. Deferral, however, is a short-term tactic; any longer-term strategies are taken care of by death: for 'Beneath it all, desire of oblivion runs' ('Wants'; *CP*, p.42).