

Past of Philip Larkin's Lost Empire

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The early work of an important writer always has a potential interest, since it is likely to contain anticipations of his later, finer poems. In Larkin's case, however, this interest is limited because of the sharp break in his writing after his first volume of poems. A sharp shift marked in the poetry of Philip Larkin after *The North Ship* (1945). Larkin's second volume, *The Less Deceived*, was published in 1955. By this time a full decade had passed since the Second World War, and the poems of this volume were consequently inspired by the after-effects of the War. While the first phase of his poetry was dominated by war-poetry, in the second phase, he focused his attention on the glorious past and on socio-political conditions, a concern that was to prevail in the third and fourth phase of his poetry as well. Thirteen poems in this volume also featured in *XX Poems*, which was published in 1951. Commenting on the poems of this volume, Larkin wrote in an unpublished letter, "They are a mixed bag."

Although victory in the war was a big cause of celebration for England, it also marked a period of decline for England as a major power in the world history. Economically, its former structure was greatly shaken. Britain was fast losing its former image as a leading imperial nation and as Correlli Barnett points out in *The Collapse of British Power* (1972), the nation, "emerged into the post war era with the foundations of her former independent national power as completely destroyed as those of France or Germany, but with the extra and calamitous drawback that, as a 'victor', she failed to realize it." (Quoted from Regan, PL 77). The British power had "quietly vanished amid the stupendous events of the Second World War". (Quoted from Regan, PL 78). The new government of England announced a number of "programmers of reforms" such as employment opportunities, life security policies, house loan facilities and education imparting policies, as a result of which, Britain came to be seen as a supposed "Welfare State" by 1950. Different political parties campaigned to lure the people. The Labour Party announced their promises in the slogan of "Fair Shares for All", while the Conservative Party

pledged "to set the people free", so now the freedom was "a matter of debate" (Regan, PL 78). The Labour government came into power but only for one year. In such circumstances, Larkin produced a small collection in the form of *XX Poems* of which 13 poems later appeared in *The Less Deceived* (1955).

In the poems of *The Less Deceived*, we find, "a careful and fastidious working out of an individual code of values" constantly with the notion of individual or personal freedom because "these poems belong to the period of post-war settlement" and in this way "constitute a reappraisal and reconstructions of what had previously been regarded as 'traditional' values and ideals, including attitude to work, religion and marriage" (Regan, PL 78). These poems are a true representation of the time, and were written to show us the political reforms of the starting post-war years from 1945-51. Larkin's attitude is "defensive" in these poems. These poems help us to understand the "post-war society". Many people envisioned their kind of ideal freedom which they could not get, for the government could not implement what they announced. Regan has talked about one of Larkin's letter to George Hartley in which Larkin "had deliberately avoided a title 'that made any claim to policy or belief' and also referred to the 'sad-eyed (and clear-eyed) realism' that informed his work" (Regan, PL 79). This 'sad-eyed' and 'clear-eyed' perspective points to Larkin's realistic appraisal of the socio-political circumstances of post-war England, which had much to be desired.

The poems of *The Less Deceived* can thus be read within the context of a movement from lost imperial state, towards the vision of a Welfare State under dark circumstances, which can be best summed up as one from "a glorious colonial past to what was increasingly seen as an austere and mediocre domestic present." (Regan, PL 80). This loss of power clearly underscores the "sad-eyed realism" of this volume. The poems mark a sense of liberalism and freedom, but these two things were nothing in comparison to the pledges and undertakings after the end of the war. Here we find Larkin dealing with the historical circumstances of his time. Thus, the skepticism and caution that are so

visible in this volume may be considered particular not to other contemporary writers but to the prevailing conditions as well :

The cold war tended to freeze public attitudes, and counselled silence about private ones. It recommended a guarded private life. (SL 154)

This volume as Larkin himself claims that is a "mixed bag" of 29 poems which mark a shift and movement in the poetry of Larkin. The volume contains some lovely poems such as 'At Grass', 'Church Going', which present a detailed observation of a real world, and some nostalgic poems such as: 'Maiden Name' and 'Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album'. The poems show us that victory in the war did not bring any recompense, rather it proved futile. Hopes seemed to be hallucination. Larkin's wry acceptance of the realities of life, his ironic sense of situation and compassionate sense of suffering make him a major poet. He is found sympathising with the human need to go to church and his fellow feelings extend to rabbits in 'Myxomatosis' and horses in 'At grass' because Larkin sees in the stricken rabbits and the retired horses a parable of the human condition itself. "The awareness of suffering and the brooding spirit of compassion that inform so much of Hardy's poetry are widely diffused throughout *The Less Deceived*." (Press, PPL 138). The emotional pattern of these compositions and Larkin's complex attitude are very much in the manner of Hardy. We find a protagonist whose life is completely uneventful, yet he fantasizes about romantic situations in poems like in 'I Remember, I Remember, and 'Poetry of Departures'.

Larkin's conscious and subconscious mind presents reality in the form of memories of a golden past in poems like 'Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album', 'Maiden Name', 'At Grass', 'Church Going', 'Next', 'Please', 'Places Loved Ones'. A few poems deal with the conflict between the self and the external reality. The poem, 'No Road', diagnoses the existential problem through the symbol of "road". In 'Reasons for Attendance', the reality of sex in the world is rejected in favour of art at the moment. In 'Wedding Wind', the happiness of the bride is juxtaposed with the sacrifice of her previous identity. The poem, 'Maiden Name', reflects on the same theme. The speaker of these poems is confronted with situational realism. This volume which has been defined as a victory of "Clarity after the formless mystification" of the early decades established Larkin not only as "the best English poet but one of the best in Europe." (Everett, PPL 227). With the publication of *The Less Deceived*, he came to be recognised as "highly regarded English poet". (Hassan 1). Larkin always sensed the need of the time.

He could not help capturing the personal experiences of the world in which he was surviving. His main aim was to reveal the truth either symbolically or satirically "I suppose I always try to write the truth", he told Ian Hamilton. (Hamilton 75). The poem, 'At Grass' is one of the best examples of Larkin's truthfulness. In his critical poems, we always find him "critical of his own tares and cranks, his knee-jerk habits" (Whalen 77). He is found highly critical of those changes which are incongruous in the world of ordinary humanity.

Gentleness characterizes the treatment of his country people in his poetry. Clear-sightedness along with an honest description and a clear understanding of how easily one can look at things with minimum time, prompts him frequently to respond with feeling for those "caught up in the pull between unpleasant reality and desired romance." (Martin PL 57). Sympathy which plays a vital role in the delineation of his characters and contemporary England, reflects the poet's quiet caring. If the opening lines of the poem, 'The Dedicated' show Larkin's "insight into the selfless withdrawal of those individuals given to quiet service." (Martin 58) :

Some must employ the scythe

Upon the grasses,

That the walks be smooth

For the feet of the angel. (CP 10)

The closing lines show the harsh realities of the profession :

... After they wait

only the colder advent,

The quenching of candles. (CP 10)

The poem, 'The March Past', is the first small poem which highlights the national spirit and focuses its attention on things that have come to an end, revealing not only "the depth of nostalgia and national sentiment" of the poet but also his "deep sense of national glory" (Regan, CCE 14). The poem which Larkin wrote in 1951, is about a military band which produces through its loud martial music:

... a sudden flock of visions :

Honey combs of heroic separation,

Pure marchings, pure marchings, (CP 55)

Which overwhelm the poet with an :

Astonishing remorse for things now ended

That of themselves were also rich and splendid

(But unsupported broke, and were not ended) (CP 55)

and points to a “synergy of nationalism” as Tom Paulin rightly observes(162).

In the poem, ‘Arrival’, Larkin arrives in a new city. Though the momentary new beginning fascinates him :

Now let me lie down, under

A wide-branched indifference,

...

For this ignorance of me

Seems a kind of innocence. (CP 51)

He is overtaken by an immediate awareness of the past which dismisses his euphoric feelings. In Keatsian manner, Larkin realises that his present happiness is transient, while the memories of the dead past are permanent:

Let me breathe till then

Its milk-aired Eden,

Till my own life impound it – (CP 51)

The opening poem of the volume, ‘Lines on a Young Lady’s Photograph Album’, focuses on the post-war scenario through a sexual symbolism. Such poems discuss the two ways of attitudes to sex, that is, a traditional and a libertarian attitude discernable during the second half of the twentieth century. The context of the poem is linked to the social and cultural reality of the post-war era. The poem which balances “libertarian attitude against traditional ideas of sexual courtship and conduct” later gives way “to the expletives of High Windows.” (Regan, PL 98). By turning over the different photographs of the album, Larkin remembers a glorious past, and accepts the present:

Or is it just the past ? Those flowers, that gate,

These misty parks and motors, lacerate

Simply by being over; (CP 72)

The poem thus shows “a resigned and quietistic acceptance of the present, along with a corresponding

sense of regret for what has passed” because “the woman in the poem is not just an object of male desire but an emblem of an irrecoverable national past; “(Regan, PL 98). Different photographs draw comparisons between the past and the present. The lady recedes into the past ignoring the present grief of the observer:

... We know what was

Won’t call on us to justify

Our grief, however hard we yowl across

The gap from eye to page (CP 72)

In a country undergoing transitional ruins and decline, Larkin’s nostalgia which is the dominant emotion, is quite understandable. The real subject of the poem is not the photograph of the lady, Winifred Arnott, but a deep sense of time and glory. However, photographs soon take an anti-romantic colouring because Larkin states that “no art is / Faithful and disappointing !” (CP 71). The anti-romantic stance of the poem becomes quite clear because both, Larkin’s poetry and photography are a true account of “Dull days as dull”, which require a “candor” that can reflect the blemishes of empirical reality. Looking out of date here signifies an inaccessible past. Excluded from the woman’s photographs, Larkin is free to lament for the past, “... a past that no one now can share”. (CP 71-72). Larkin’s nostalgia is possible only because the past he now observes is isolated from him. A draft version emphasized this separation:

That is your past that I can never share

Developed, fixed and mounted high and dry

In days I cannot rifle if I try...

(Quoted from Swarbrick 50)

For Larkin the past is now irrecoverable and out of reach.

The “superiority of a crystallized past over a molten present” as Florence Elton points out (97) is presented with a consistent irony and self-critical awareness that avoids “the reality of the flat photographic ‘place’ along with the ‘face’ (Reibetanz 275). The speaker in the poem starts looking voraciously at photographs that present nostalgic images of the past: “My swivel eye hungers from pose to pose” (CP 71).

Always drawn to the past compulsively, the photographs of the lady attract Larkin only because of

the reality of the past. For him, the past has been a source of great delight, for he can contemplate it clearly and steadily and the loss of connection between past and present is a real loss. His past cannot retreat and his concern with it: is a concern with distinguishing real from unreal aspirations, true possibilities from false or mistaken ones, as a means of becoming clearer about what is real and what is unreal in his experience in the present. (Scofield 377)

The poem tells us that "life is an 'album' and the days are its pages – some of which are dull and some of which are bright." (Hassan 25). The present can be illuminated by recalling the past, but it is impossible to better the past:

Or is it just the past? Those flowers, that gate,

These misty parks and motors, lacerate

Simply being over; (CP 72)

A deep sense of a glorious past and regret is over its loss is evident in the final stanza of the poem:

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. (CP 72)

The poem, 'Places, Loved Ones', also focuses on Larkin's concern for nostalgia and the poet's confusion in the midst of a post-war decline in which the landscapes of his country tell him that a change has occurred. Although such a changed state makes it difficult for him to either stay or live in his country, he soon regains his composure through a patriotic sentiment that enables him to come to terms with what he has at present:

No, I have never found

The place where I could say

This is my proper ground,

Here I shall stay; (CP 99)

Larkin was always found wanting for a "proper ground". This poem shows his longing for the right habitat. Even though he finds himself victimized by the rationalization of post-war situations and lacks in the

determination to remedy such a situation.

'Reason for Attendance', explores notions of personal freedom through sexual activity. Larkin pours out his suffocation and frustration through the idea of sexual freedom, which was one of the social consequences of war-society. He deliberates on the nature of sex, by posing a question- "but what/ls sex? (CP 80) and to view it as a medium for providing personal happiness and satisfaction, in a decade of deprivation in which happiness and satisfaction were beyond the reach of common man. However, Larkin considers himself a misfit among those who can enjoy the sensual pleasures of an activity in which he can only participate as a silent observer :

But nor for me, nor I for them; and so

With happiness. Therefore I stay outside, (CP 80)

At a deeper level, the poem, "is concerned with changing codes of value and belief in a modern democratic society, a point reinforced by the prominent parallel structure of "I... believing this and they... believing that". (Regan, PL 95). The poem also presents "Social and cultural differences" where "the satisfaction of the individual" is balanced "against that of the crowd. "(Regan, PL 95).

'Dry Point' is another poem with a rich sub-text that refers to the prevailing sexual attitude during the post-war years. One concern that Larkin wants to point out through his sexual politics, is, that longing for freedom in sex is either deceptive or short lived. Sex and love, therefore "operate within a specific area of social meanings and values." as Regan points out (PL 97). 'Dry Point' poem also reveals Larkin's Englishness through the notion of personal autonomy, which he offers as a defence against marriage, or any other alliance :

What ashen hills ! what salted, shruken lakes !

How leaden the ring looks,

Birmingham magic all discredited,

And how remote that bare and sunscrubbed room

Intensely far, that padlocked cube of light

We neither define nor prove,

Where you, we dream, obtain no light of entry. (CP 37)

Although death is the ostensible theme of 'Next, Please', yet Larkin presents a striking comparison

between the past and the present in the poem :

Our habitual anticipation to sitting on a bluff waiting for the ship to come in loaded with compensations for past failure and disappointments. Just as this ship proves to be an illusion, so does the presumed time of its arrival which immediately turns from anticipated future to regretted past. With understanding Larkin catches here the emotion attending man's inability to be simplistically rooted in the present. (Martin 47)

We hope continually for a better and durable future or present time imagining some "vantage-point", but we have to contend with the present, which shows the ruins of the past and signs of the future. Here Larkin presents an event in relation to its past, present and future through the allegory of a ship. The future seems to be a "sparkling armada of promises" (CP 52). We see this ship "draw near" (CP 52) in the present time, but "it never anchors; it's/ No sooner present than it turns to past" (CP 52). And the ship of death is eternal. Only one ship is seeking us, a "sailed unfamiliar" (CP 52).

The poem shows the futility of our hopes and expectations and reflects the poet's frustration over the Welfare State. The poem can be analysed in terms of "freedom from illusion" (Regan, PL 91), but this psychological freedom is concerned with the "political quietism of the post-war years" (Regan, PL 91).

The poem, 'Wants', expresses a wish for oblivion and solitude. The protagonist shies away from the attractive possibilities of harsh experience of life :

Beyond all this, the wish to be alone :

However the sky grows dark with invitation- cards

However we follow the printed directions of sex

However the family is photographed under the flagstaff-

Beyond all this, the wish to be alone

Beneath it all, desire of oblivion runs:

Despite the artful tensions of the calendar,

The life insurance, the tabled fertility rites,

The costly aversion of the eyes from death-

Beneath it all, desire of oblivion runs. (CP 42)

In the poem, 'Maiden Name', which is "an obvious

companion piece to "Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album". (Swarbrick 51), once again the same idea of past and present is expressed through the physical beauty of a maiden. It raises the same issue of time and memory, that is, of past and present. The poem is addressed to the same lady, Winifred Arnott. After marriage, the lady changes her name, so that her present identity cannot be compared with her past identity. Her maiden name is a remembrance of the past, which irrevocably belongs to the past. Just as her present beauty shows "What we feel now about [her]" (CP 101). So also her old name "shelters our faithlessness" (CP 101). What the past presents and perceives is gone. This accessible ideal always survives in the poetry of Philip Larkin.

Larkin's perception of liberty is once again evident in poems like 'No Road', 'Best Society' and 'Marriages'. The same theme of liberty and freedom is explored through animal fable in, 'Wires'. Literally, the poem is about the control over cattle, but at a deeper level, it conveys a sense of freedom. The opening and the last lines of the poem tell us about the idea of restrictions or control over one's freedom. These lines suggest that freedom is an imaginary condition with no material existence :

The Widest prairies have electric fences,

Which act as :

Electric limits to their widest senses. (CP 48)

Through the poem, we come to know that "the fable works to" articulate the conditions of restraint that it describes." It is significant to note how "ideas are shaped by a particular social context". (Regan, PL 83). The idea of freedom is not associated with encroachment, which usually happens in the case of cattle, so the words "blunder" and "violence" define freedom in terms of "dangerous illusion".

'Church Going' is a significant poem in the context of socio-religious of the post-war years when the attendance of "churchgoers" had declined considerably. The poem begins with the poet riding his bicycle going past a church that he hesitates to enter. And once inside, he is drawn more to its architecture, which is a reminder of the rich religious tradition of England. The poet now focuses on the loss of belief in religious ceremonies that was noticed after 1945, when such worshipping places appeared to lose their significance in terms of moral education. Larkin also refers to familiar social and religious rituals that might formally have originated in the church. The poem evokes the reality of a physical world in which the

speaker ponders over the declining attitudes towards traditional belief and faiths. It reflects the poet's fidelity to "outward detail and to subjective feeling" only to remind us that both are inseparable. (Sharrock 122). It becomes explicit then that Larkin is seen as a spokesman of the average person living in post-World War II England. The poem acknowledges Larkin as an agnostic, puzzled over the attraction that churches hold for him. The poem elaborates a fact that with the passage of time, people's rituals and beliefs may decline even as the glory of the British Empire had declined after the Second World War. The poem also confirms that there is a link between the mighty nature of time and man's subjectivity to it. The site of the church reminds us of a deep sense of loss, blasted hopes and shattered dreams, which follow upon the destruction of what once stood for a sense of a traditional, community and harmony.

The poem, as Richman states, begins in the voice of a "board atheist, to whom the empty church" appears to be "a baffling rather absurd monument." (12). The poet gets off his bicycle and :

Once I am sure there's nothing going on
I step inside, letting the door thud shut.
Another church: matting, seats, and stone,
And little books; sprawling of flowers, cut
For Sunday, brownish now; some brass and stuff
Up at the holy end; the small neat organ;
And a tense, musty, unignorable silence,
Brewed God knows how long. Hatless, I took off.
My cycle-clips in awkward reverence,
Move forward, run my hand around the font.
From where I stand, the roof looks almost new –
Cleaned, or restored ? Someone would know : I don't
Mounting the lectern, I peruse a few
Hectoring large-scale verses, and pronounce
'Here endeth' much more loudly than I'd meant.
The echoes snigger briefly. Back at the door
I sign the book, donate an Irish sixpence,

Reflect the place was not worth stopping for. (CP 97)

In the beginning of his visit, the visitor does not find any attraction in the physical appearance of the church, and thinks the places as "not worth stopping for" (CP 97). These are the views of an Englishman who is now an atheist. He wonders what uses churches would fall to in post-war England:

... wondering, too

When churches fall completely out of use

What we shall turn them into, if We shall keep

A few cathedrals chronically on show,

Their parchment, plate and pyx in locked cases,

And let the rest-rent-free to rain and sheep.

Shall we avoid them as unlucky places?

(CP 97)

.... I wonder who

Will be the last, the very last, to seek

This place for what it was; (CP 98)

This poem also reiterates the intrinsic worth of the English tradition to which Larkin remains true by writing as an English citizen. The first two stanzas of the poem give the "details of a particular individual's visit to church" but from the third stanza with the "replacement of 'I' with 'we' Larkin begins to universalize the experience" (Morrison 229).

Morrison further tells that "the problem of the place of church in a modern agnostic society is represented as one with which 'we' are all concerned." (29). Larkin insists recording his experience of a place that has lost is sanctity and all that it had once stood for in a society that has experienced the horrors of a bloody War.

Larkin however, does sound nostalgic. In visiting the church, the speaker seems to be visiting "a whole round of rural life about to disappear entirely." (Martin 33). 'Church Going', confirmed Larkin's reputation in England and America during the years that he was seen "confronting the disparity between his professed unbelief in the sanctities of traditional Christianity and his own "gravitating" to that anachronistic centre of such piety, the country church" (Martin 39). Larkin's wavering belief, despair and loneliness are also evident besides his close observation of the church.

The poem can be viewed as a possible danger to Christianity due to the Second World War, because we find the speaker very:

sensitive to the possibility of religion, yet conditioned by at least a couple of generations of widespread scorn blending into indifference toward Christianity. (Martin 40)

The poem expresses Larkin's larger prediction about a future "in which churches will be abandoned", but suddenly records "an emotional ending that registers so serious a break with our cultural traditions." (Black 153). G.S. Fraser calls it the "Movement's prize poem". The significance of this age-old religious institution in the contemporary agnostic time has been analysed in all fairness and objectivity. The speaker or the protagonist enters the church "certainly not as a devotee to join the services", rather, his "intention is to visualize the future of this sacred building threatened to be turned into a deserted place by the quick disappearance of religious faith." (Pandey 53). As an Englishman Larkin visualizes the church as more than a belief. He also analyses it in terms of belief and disbelief. He interprets it in terms of Christianity where three important ceremonies of life are held, that is, birth, marriage and death, therefore the church will continue to be seen as a symbol of respect:

... marriage, and birth,

And death, and thoughts of these-for which was built.

This special shell? (CP 98)

The church is thus viewed as the repository of the profoundest human feelings :

In whose blent air all our compulsions meet, (CP 98)

The church also stands for the reality of suffering in the world, It is the same building which stands for the upliftment of the soul's-journey. Even if religious institutions turn into places of historical interest to be visited by the tourists, they still reflect their primary functions:

Church is not just any building or a museum to be visited trauntly with archaeological interests. It is imperative on the part of the visitor to have faith in Christ before entering this holy premises lest its sanctity might be corroded. (Pandey 61)

The protagonist casually enters the building and examines the church, signs the book and drops "an Irish sixpence" into the charity box in a manner that points to the meaninglessness of ritualistic visits to the

church. The poem was written in an agnostic age when religious ceremonies seemed to be no longer relevant. Once the symbol of "an ordered and stable society", the church now stands in ruins in the midst of our own "less innocent, more brash, more disorganised times" says Brownjohn (12).

'Church Going', underscores tension between the feeling and belief of an embarrassed and agnostic church visitor. The poem eludes conservative and empirical attitudes, "high emotion, and a refusal to treat religious experiences in anything but secular terms." (Naremore 338). Rituals like "marriage, and birth, / And death" are always associated with the church, but the agnostic pays tribute to its decaying presence instead, by donating an "Irish sixpence" (CP 97). The changed attitude of the visitor reflects that few people stepped into the church for it "was not worth stopping for" (CP 97). The poem sets before us the conflict and confusion of an atheist during post-war years. Larkin's was concerned with preserving and restoring forgotten English rituals and traditions in a fully secular world. 'Church Going' and 'The Whitsun Weddings' are the two best examples of such endeavours. The speaker in the poem notices the absence of a mass-going crowd, enters the church when no service is going on and inspects it with a suspicion look of general ignorance. The poem thus stands for the collapse of faiths in the years following World War-II, for it seems to us that rational people hardly visited churches and looked upon religious people as superstitious:

Or, after dark, will dubious women come

To make their children touch a particular stone;

Pick simples for a cancer; or on some

Advised night see walking a dead one?

Power of some sort or other will go on

In games, in riddles, seemingly at random;

But superstition, like belief, must die. (CP 97-98)

However, the poet is equally concerned about "what remains when disbelief has gone?" (CP 98). When churches lose their real significance, they will have only:

Grass, weedy pavement, brambles, buttress, sky,

A shapeless recognisable each week,

A purpose more obscure

(CP 98)

He is also convinced that one day some God-fearing man would try "to seek/ This place for what it was;" (CP 98). Even though it may be to host ceremonies of birth", "marriage" and "death". He goes on to say that ceremonies of "birth" and "marriage" may be avoidable but the ceremony of death is inescapable. It is because of such "compulsions" that people will have to visit the church. Larkin's own belief is that the church will always stand for such rituals, however atheist the prevailing temper may be, a belief he validates in his conversation with Ian Hamilton:

Of course the poem is about going to church – I tried to suggest this by the title – birth, marriage and death – that going to church represents. (Four Conversations 73-74)

The sacred building in this poem is seen with an ironic scorn that marks Larkin's ironic exploration. In poems like this, the speakers are curious about their surroundings in their search for an "intelligibility to the world that surrounds [them]". The speaker here has two voices, one sceptical and the other an "emergence of identity". He applies both the voices to his exploration of the church. The first voice seems to have left superstition behind, but soon realises the fragility of his first voice for the church stands for – "A purpose more obscure" (CP 98). It is his second voice that provides the true significance of the church. The first voice ultimately becomes "the agent of more serious concerns" as Hassan observes (19), and we find Larkin "battling social superiority" with the "egotism" of an Englishman (Whalen 77).

The final stanza erases all traces of "uneasy jocularity" when the real significance of the church is discovered :

... For, though I've no idea

What this accoutred frowsty barn is worth,

It pleases me to stand in silence here;

A serious house on serious earth it is,

In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,

Are recognised, and robbed as destined.

And that much never can be obsolete,

Since someone will forever be surprising.

A hunger in himself to be more serious,

And gravitating with it to this ground,

Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in,

If only that so many dead lie round. (CP 98)

Although the poem evokes an agnosticism, it can also be understood in terms of the religious ambivalence that governed English society under a Welfare construction. The speaker who is curious about the church, but ignorant about the "brass and stuff/ Up at the holy end." or about "roots-lofts", is also attracted at the same time by the "tense, musty, unignorable silence/ Brewed God knows how long." The irreverence of the speaker is obvious from the language employed and particularly from his donation of "an Irish sixpence", but he is also very conscious of to his visit to the church and does not shed his agnosticism. The poem is then about belief in the post-war construction. In "Four Conversations", Larkin says that the poem is about "the union of the important stages of human life- birth, marriage and death – that going to church represents." (Quoted from Ramanan 73). The poem is ironic in its attitude to experience. The church is seen as an obsolescence, but still houses the "compulsions" of its visitors.

'Myxomatosis', an animal fable, focuses on the reality of misery and suffering in human life, during the transitional stage in the making of a Welfare State. This poem, was inspired by the outbreak of rabbit disease in Kent and Sussex in October in 1953. The poem attempts to imagine "the rabbit asking 'What trap is this? Where were its teeth concealed?'" The reactions of the speaker suggest that the poem is establishing a parallel between the fate of the animal and a certain dimension of human existence. Words such as "caught", "trap" and "jaws", "suggest that the common experience described is one of suffering, powerlessness and helplessness." (Regan, PL 83-84). Again poem, 'Toads', also written in similar manner, contains "an implied sense of resentment at the limitations of contemporary social experience" and also conveys a "futile rebellion". (Regan, PL 84). The poem conveys with an anxiety over the "idea of work" as an essential activity of life. The debate over the question of work and desire raises frustrations that point to one of the fundamental problems of post-war society. In the manner of fable, this poem is valuable for its notable questions and debate "about individual rights and responsibilities in a modern democratic society" registering "changing and conflicting social attitudes." (Regan, PL 84):

Lots of folk live on their wits

Lecturers, lispers
Losels, loblolly-men, louts –
They don't end as paupers;
Lots of folk live up lanes
With fires in a bucket,
Eat wind falls and tinned sardines –
They seem to like it.
Their nippers have got bare feet,
Their unspeakable wives
Are skinny as whippets – and yet
No one actually starves (CP 89)

These lines reflect the reality of the upper-middle and middle-class life of England after the War. Larkin's typical English urbanity "embraces both conformism and non conformism". The poem begins in "mood of rebellion and defiance and ends in a mood of quietism and apparent resignation" (Regan, PL 86). The use of personal pronouns reflect "the essential idea of freedom in terms of the individual against society." as Regan suggests (PL 86). The speaker ponders over the logic of why he should not let work "squat" on his life, only to fall back on a moralistic denunciation of those managing to survive without work. He tries to reconcile his attachment to his job with his basic dislike of work. The poem thus fills the gap between desire and reality or between the dream and actuality.

Though most readers consider the poem 'Deceptions', to be about sexual attitudes, it also emphasizes poverty and exploitation, and its true value lies in its: historical grasp of a general social condition : 'every memory of that oppressed Victorian underclass ... was a victim of deception, blinded by ideological conditions to the real conditions of their lives. (Regan, CCE 12)

'At Grass', is one of the best poems that embodies Larkin's patriotic spirit. Here, it is horses who symbolize England's glorious past. The poet takes us back to the outbreak of the war. Some "fifteen years ago" when everything pointed to normal life. Those past memories, however, return to haunt and disturb life now. Querries like "Do memories plague their ears like flies? enable the poet to effectively "tap nostalgia for a past 'glory that was England'" (Regan, PL 81)

The Critic Tom Paulin too confirms that "Larkin's sad lyricism is rooted in a culture" which evokes "a sense of diminished purpose and fading imperial power" (Quoted from Regan, PL 81). Carefully written to show the "moment of lost glory in the years preceding the international crisis that led to war." (PL 81). Regan asserts Larkin's Englishness from the very context of the poem:

'At Grass' is a quintessentially English poem. Its Englishness is evident not just in its memories of "Cups and Stakes and Handicaps" and its bright evocations of "classic" summers, but also in its modified use of the pastoral convention. There are hints of eighteenth century English paternalism in the elegiac mood of the poem, but Larkin's version of pastoral is one that has been adapted to the peculiar needs of post-war society; its pastures are a place of "shelter", place fittingly described by the negative prefix in "unmolesting meadows". 'At Grass' is a powerfully evocative poem which draws skillfully on the traditional resources of English lyricism. (PL 82)

The poem is also hailed as "a fable of freedom" by Cox and Dyson who claim that the horses in the poem "have a freedom which humans can never achieve", and interpret the poem in terms of "the inevitability of fate" (Quoted from Regan, PL 83). The poem also reveals to us the ambiguous sense of liberty and freedom in those years, contained in the " 'bridles' of the closing stanza" which Regan perceives as a more appropriate image of Welfare State dependency" (PL 83).

'At Grass' explores the theme of a glorious past and a static present through the image of two retired race horses with a "two fold background, that is, partly existing and partly inferred." (Hassan 23). The existing place is one where the horses pass their last days on "the unmolesting meadows" in the stable. The "inferred" meaning of the poem is reinforced through the remaining stanzas of the poem. The opening stanza of the poem combines the past and the present through the life of inactive and anonymous horses who are so changed that it is difficult to recognise them :

The eye can hardly pick them out
From the cold shade they shelter in,
Till wind distresses tail and mane;
Then one crop grass, and moves about
- The other seeming to look on -
And stands anonymous again (CP 29)

The horses “incarnate a misty truth of their past” as Hassan observes (23), while they anonymously reminiscing over their past. Their anonymity reflects “impoverished present” of the horses because their present is so colourless in comparison to the richness of their past.

One significant aspect of Larkin’s poetry is that the bridge he builds between the present and the past is to reiterate the superiority of the past over the present. The retired race horses are presented as social creatures who have established their reputation on the race course by winning accolades in their past, but now face a life of barren and morbid anonymity because they have outlived their utility. National decline is the real theme of the poem. While some Movement writers were deeply ambivalent towards the changing balance of power after 1945 and preferred to promote and represent the democratic ideals of a new society, writers like Philip Larkin expressed their deep sense of nostalgia and regret in the face of Britain’s decline as a world power. The poem thus became one of the most celebrated poems that symbolized loss of power. By setting up a glorious past of “Cups and Stakes and Handicaps” against “the 1950s England which appears dull, pinched, banal and second rate”, Larkin’s poem then, establishes a definite link between his “national and personal life... through the idea of power and its loss”, as Paulin rightly points out (164).

This satiric animal fable depicting a declining post-war Britain, is also reflective of a patriotic literature zeal which the existing climate demanded. This may partly explain the popularity of the poem. Regarded as one of the best poems from Larkin’s poetic genius, its entire fame rests on its symbolic texture, which identifies it as a poem of “post-imperial tristesse” as Morrison suggests (83). The depleted present of the horses may trouble them with memories of “faint afternoons” and “faded, classic Junes” that are a reminder of warmth, noise, fame and achievement, of:

Silks at the start : against the sky

Numbers and parasols : outside,

Squadrons of empty cars, and heat,

And littered grass : than the long cry

Hanging unrushed till it subside.

To stop-press columns on the street. (CP 29)

The sadness of the “unmolesting meadows” now is reconciled with a present where the horses will not participate in any race for fame and glory, but will have

a new kind of pleasure in peace :

And not a field glass sees them home,

Or curious stop watch prophesies :

Only the groom, and the groom’s boy,

With bridles in the evening come. (CP 30)

Blake Morrison puts the imperial structure of the poem in balanced perspective by stating that:

It would certainly be possible to argue for the presence in the poems of the language of imperial achievement – “squadrons”, “heat”, “littered grass”, “stop-press-columns”, “classic Junes” – and for the language of imperial loss – “cold shade”, “distresses”, “anonymous”, “almanacked”, “memories”, “yet fifteen years ago.” (83)

‘At Grass’, thus, asserts the feelings of loss and regret of the British populace at the fading away of a felicitous past which has given way to harsh realities, focusing on the emotional insecurity of old retired race-horses. The poem seems to draw instead a comparison between the retired race-horses and the fate of his countrymen:

Certainly regret for the passing of time and glory is probable in in the World of Larkin’s poetry; for numerous reasons can never approach the contentment of a Rabbi Ben Ezra. At best they achieve a standoff against regret ... In a real sense he projects his ideals onto the horses, attributing human motives to their shaking of heads much as does Frost’s speaker in ‘Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening.’ (Martin 89)

The arguments of the critics notwithstanding, what is most evident is that the poem marks the start of a remarkably fruitful period for the poet after the aridity of 1947-9. Through its presentation of a “typical black Larkinesque meditation on the ravages of time” as Richman puts it (13) and satisfies the deepest needs of the poet even while it provides full satisfaction to the reader through embodiment .

The best poem in *The Less Deceived* which deals with the past in the most profound way, ‘At grass’, is not just a delineation of the world of retired horses, but “a nostalgic water colour of the English scene” (Alvarez 30), a super past made cool and calm by the passage of the time. However, it is also about a past which for Larkin is like a live hearth beside which he is seen lamenting for the passing of a golden era in the history of England. The past is brought into focus as a way of “illuminating and giving solace to the present, rather

than obfuscating it with anodyne illusions.” (Schofield 378). The poem does not idealise the retirement of the race horses, for the poet seems to be worried about their fate, the retirement. Sensing the passing way of a golden period, the poet is disturbed over the future of his country. Larkin’s nostalgia expressed through his horses, churches and photographs, thus becomes a medium for the effective articulation of his profoundly patriotic nature.

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