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'I don't really notice where I live': Philip Larkin's Literary Nationalities

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by

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Abbreviations

All references to the works of Philip Larkin are incorporated in the text using the following abbreviations:

<i>AGIW</i>	<i>A Girl in Winter</i>
<i>AWJ</i>	<i>All What Jazz</i>
<i>FR</i>	<i>Further Requirements</i>
<i>LJ</i>	<i>Larkin's Jazz</i>
<i>LM</i>	<i>Letters to Monica</i>
<i>RW</i>	<i>Required Writing</i>
<i>SL</i>	<i>Selected Letters</i>

All other citations may be found in the notes.

NOTE: In order to avoid confusion between the 1988 and the 2003 editions of Larkin's *Collected Poems* and the newly published *Complete Poems* I am refraining from referring to a specific volume. Although I have used Thwaite's 1988 version of the *Collected Poems*, all of Larkin's individual poems cited - unless otherwise indicated - are clearly identified by their respective titles.

Introduction

With the journalist's playfulness John Haffenden implicitly accuses Philip Larkin of "narrow-mindedness" and "cultural chauvinism" in his well-documented interview from 1981. Philip Larkin replies with two counter-questions: "But honestly, how far can one really assimilate literature in another language? In the sense that you can read your own?"¹ If it was impossible to read, understand and emotionally react to literature in a foreign language as opposed to literary works composed in one's native language, the foreign Larkin scholar would arrive at a dead-end before he or she has even crossed the Channel to England. The appeal of Larkin's poetry would be restricted to a relatively small English target group. Is it this specific group Larkin has in mind when he says that "you write for everybody. Or anybody who will listen"?² A look at the standard works of Larkin criticism almost makes this likely; most Larkin critics are either comfortably sharing Larkin's own nationality or are at least Irish, Scottish, Welsh, American or Canadian native speakers of English. Thus, we hardly seem to be in a position to judge safely whether Larkin's own poetry can be assimilated elsewhere.

It is thus that Larkin's *oeuvre* - prompted, to a large extent, by the poet's own gruff assertion of comfortable insularity - is all too often perceived on narrowly English terms. Larkin's cultural and national identity is taken for granted; his disparaging comments about abroad ("I hate being abroad. Generally speaking, the further one gets from home the greater the misery."³) are taken at face value.

Perhaps it takes the perspective of a foreign European and non-native speaker of

¹ Philip Larkin, *Further Requirements Interviews, Broadcasts, Statements and Book Reviews 1952-1985*, Anthony Thwaite (ed.), Faber and Faber Limited, London, 2001, p. 54

² Philip Larkin, *Required Writing Miscellaneous Pieces 1955-1982*, Faber and Faber, London, 1983, p. 59

³ *Ibid.*, p. 55

English to crack open dated perceptions.

Indeed, Larkin's engagement with cultural Otherness is profound. Tim Trengrove-Jones notes that "Larkin's aesthetic took root and found its mature expression through specific moments of contact with the German, the French, and the Dutch"⁴ only to conclude paradoxically that these points of contact with the European Other cement Larkin's position of English insularity. Larkin's cultural identity will remain firmly English; his poetic engagement with cultural Otherness between Europe and America, however, transcends notions of petty insularity by a long stretch. His engagement with Ireland, France, America and Germany is so obviously premeditated that we can speak of *literary nationalities*. Jean-François Bayart's comment that "we identify ourselves less with respect to membership in a community or a culture than with respect to the communities and cultures with which we have relations"⁵ is of particular significance in this context. Furthermore, Larkin's negotiations of literary nationalities constantly exhibit points of contact with Marc Augé's theory of *non-place*. It is against this background that the theory of the universality - as opposed to an assumed Englishness - of Larkin's poetry is developed.

In the context of political and sociological theories of nation and cultural identity I will argue that Larkin's identity in his poetry is expressed through an awareness of common humanity as opposed to cultural exclusiveness. Introducing the ancient Stoics' idea of cultural identity as concentric circles that denote self, family, city, nation and so on, I will argue that the universal appeal of Larkin's poetry lies in the fact that he is always as intimately conscious in his writing of the outermost circle of 'common humanity' as he is of narrower more socially, politically or geographically limited self-definitions. In this he differs from Betjeman and Hughes who remain more English than

⁴ Tim Trengrove-Jones, "Larkin and Europe", in: *English Studies in Africa*, 35:2 (1992), p. 55

⁵ Jean-François Bayart, *The Illusion of Cultural Identity*, 2005, Hurst&Company, p. 95

Larkin because they define themselves within the categories of the inner circles: class, nation, economic group. It is Augé's non-place in its familiarity that enhances the impression of universality in Larkin's work.

When Larkin mourns the loss of the "fields and farms" and "the meadows, the lanes" in "Going, Going", elaborates on the "wind-muscled wheatfields" and the "[t]all church-towers" of "Howden and Beverley, Hedon and Patrington" in "Bridge for the Living" he negotiates not only the markers of English culture but also the (English) poetic tradition of pastoral. If Larkin's non-place in its universal particularity comes at the Stoics' concentric circles from the outside and touches on common humanity first, then Larkin's version of provincialism perhaps entails sculpting the province in its particular universality as the smallest recognizable fragment within the circles of cultural identity. It is the less-deceived quality of Larkin's approach to the poetic tradition that paradoxically makes a poem like "Here" a full-blooded pastoral.

"The Importance of Elsewhere" has often been discussed in the context of its confrontation of two national identities, English and Irish, and the poet's evasion of his own national identity in the liminal space between them. The chapter on Ireland will explore how different Larkin's negotiation of nationality is from, say, that of Seamus Heaney, who never seems to stop digging, constantly looks downwards and backwards and seems to remain safely within the parameters of Irish national identity. Terry Whalen states that Larkin's "best poems written in Ireland were not necessarily about Ireland at all" thus underlining Larkin's immunity against "that Irish impulse to name and fix".⁶

A reading of Patrick Kavanagh's "My Room" against Larkin's "Poetry of Departures"

⁶ Terry Whalen, "'Strangeness Made Sense' – Philip Larkin in Ireland" in: *The Antigone Review* 107, Autumn 1996, accessed online 18/11/2007 <http://www.antigonishreview.com/bi-107/107-whalen.html> - no page numbers given

emphasises the fatality of assumed historico-political contexts to poetical works.

The strong influence of Jules Laforgue on Larkin is the cutting edge of a larger set of influences from France. Gautier, Baudelaire, Verlaine, Rimbaud and the *Symbolistes* all leave more or less visible marks on different phases of his poetry, and feed one of the main strands of his poetic style. Larkin is often seen to arrive at Laforgue via Eliot, but this chapter explores how differently both poets assimilate the French poet's influence. Larkin's 'Dutch' poem "The Card-Players" is a striking negotiation of Laforgue with one of Larkin's very few realisations of anthropological, chthonic place.

Larkin's English identity is clarified most effectively perhaps in juxtaposition with the familiar big brother, or brash cousin Otherness of America. Larkin's loud confrontation with the American, or 'international' Modernism of 'the mad lads' who followed Pound perhaps distorts the picture. His work frequently echoes that of Eliot, and contains many modernist elements. From his early youth the States were a vivid country of his mind, black American jazz providing an essential element in his sensibility, and affected his poetry in subtle ways which are not always immediately evident. Larkin's 'jazz-poetry' sets him in a context with the Beat poets, particularly Allen Ginsberg. However, jazz is not the sole point of contact with the USA. Indeed, Larkin engages with the poetry of the confessional poets and exhibits some striking intertextual relations with the poetry of Sylvia Plath.

Larkin's encounters with Germany were in terms of actual visits early in his life, rather than a profound literary influence. Nevertheless it is significant that both *Jill* and *A Girl in Winter*, miss out on the opportunity to swear allegiance to England in time of war. This chapter will build on the evidence that, though 'foreign' rather than of any specific nationality, Katherine in *A Girl in Winter* is the imaginative product of Larkin's experience of Germany. Furthermore, the allegedly German Katherine functions as the

fully realized prototype for the alienated speakers in Larkin's mature poetry.

Larkin's almost proverbial exclamation "Foreign poetry? No!"⁷ is thus exposed as one of his characteristic masks. Indeed, the negotiation of and engagement with foreign poetry allows him to try on different literary nationalities without having to leave his cultural comfort zone. It is thus that Larkin's poetry becomes universal.

⁷ *FR*, p. 25

Chapter 1

Not only in England, but anywhere in the world

James Booth vigorously opposes Seamus Heaney's perception of Philip Larkin as a "little Englander" and states: "Larkin is no hoarder and shorer of Englishness. His nationality is not a matter of provincial ideology."⁸ This implies that Larkin's poetry is free from national ideology, and projects Larkin as a universalist poet. Indeed, when Larkin writes to Patsy Strang, he seems to confirm this view as he singles out lyric poetry's eternal themes as central to his *oeuvre*:

I should like to write about 75-100 new poems [...] dealing with such subjects as *Life, Death, Time, Love, and Scenery* in such a manner as would render further attention to them by other poets superfluous.⁹ [emphasis mine]

These concepts appear so significant to him that he spells each with a capital letter. Wordsworth in his *Preface* already locates "the essential passions of the heart", "our elementary feelings [...] in a state of simplicity"¹⁰ at the centre of all poetry. Or to put it in Hulme's words: "Warmth's the very stuff of poesy."¹¹

Larkin's "Talking in Bed" (1960), for instance, has such "elementary feelings" at its centre. Despite dealing with the isolation of two lovers in a situation that should warrant the height of intimacy – together in bed - "Talking in Bed" is still a love poem in the sense of expressing Wordsworth's "essential passions of the heart". Together in bed, the unspecified "two people" in the poem form "an emblem of two people being honest",

⁸ James Booth, *The Poet's Plight*, Palgrave Macmillan, Houndmills, Basingstoke, 2005, p. 139

⁹ Philip Larkin, *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin 1940-1985*, Anthony Thwaite (ed.), Faber and Faber Limited, London, 1992, p. 202

¹⁰ William Wordsworth, "Preface to the Lyrical Ballads", *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth Vol.1*, W.J.B. Owen and J.W. Smyser (eds.), Humanities-Ebooks, 2008, p. 145

¹¹ T.E. Hulme, *Selected Writings*, Patrick McGuinness (ed.), Carcanet Press Ltd., Manchester, 2003, p. 2

except that they do not. This “emblem” reminds the reader of Larkin’s “An Arundel Tomb” from the same year in which the observation of two stone statues holding hands prompts the conclusion “What will survive of us is love”. In his workbook, next to “An Arundel Tomb”, an irritated Larkin scribbled the line “Love isn’t stronger than death just because statues hold hands for 600 years”.¹² It is this sentiment of brutal honesty that lies at the heart of “Talking in Bed”.

The verb “talking” only appears in the title of the poem and as the first word in the first line. In the rest of the poem there is no verb that describes the act of communication; there is merely the failure to find words in the last of four stanzas: “It becomes still more difficult to find/Words”. The movements that take place in the poem are extrinsic rather than intrinsic. The lovers do not turn to each other, no hand is outstretched, but “time passes silently”, the wind “Builds and disperses clouds” and “dark towns heap up on the horizon” – the lovers seem to be frozen in their desperate attempt to find the right words. Fittingly, there are no defining features in the poem’s space. The reader encounters two lovers in *a* bed, there is no room as such, no qualifiers as, say, “dark oak” for the bed, no linen, no other props. In the same way that the speaker’s gaze is pulled outside looking for words, the reader’s gaze follows the speaker’s as it will not be distracted by insignificant stage props. It is of no relevance whatsoever whether the speaker is male or female (indeed, it could be either) or whether the lovers are homosexual, at the centre of the poem stands the intensely human emotion of destroying this intimacy by the wrong words when etiquette and expectation require us to say exactly the right words in bed.

Larkin’s characteristic negative prefixes in “the wind’s incomplete unrest” and words that are “not untrue and not unkind” curiously refuse to follow grammatical rules: the

¹² Andrew Motion, *A Writer's Life*, Faber and Faber Limited, London, 1993, p. 247

“wind’s incomplete unrest” and the words that are “not untrue and not unkind” fail to follow the rule ‘two negatives = positive’ in the same way as the two lovers will not enter communication for lack of true things to say (two lovers \neq truth).

“Talking in Bed” despite the apparent distance of the lovers from each other is a fundamentally human poem expressing a fundamentally human sentiment, a situation many of its readers will have experienced. It is very easy to reduce the poem to a biographical context – the relationship between Philip Larkin and Monica Jones – but there is not the slightest indicator of that in the poem itself. The reader has to distinguish between text and context, letting go of a narrow context when the text itself offers so much more.

The lack of cultural markers, stage props, biographical detail or even gender markers in this poem might make it abstract and tenuous, but the experience in the poem is so intensely, identifiably human that “Talking in Bed” succeeds as a meditation on one of literature’s most universal themes: love.

Larkin’s “Morning at last: there in the snow” - unpublished during his lifetime - works in similar ways. The speaker contemplates the coming and going footprints of his departed lover in the snow and marvels on these traces of “your life walking into mine”. Significantly, there are no singular pronouns in the poem apart from the third person plural in “they vanish with the rain” denoting the footprints. The absence of both the first person singular “I” and the second person singular “you” in the poem indicate the fulfilled nature of the relationship at which merely the possessive pronouns hint: “your life walking into mine”. The rhyme scheme with its regular triplets in three stanzas emphasizes the harmony of this relationship. The rather conventional rhymes and the everyday diction underline the speaker’s unagitated emotion. As with “Talking in Bed”, the speaker in “Morning at last...” could be male or female. And while the poem gives

us a few more stage props of a romantic evening than “Talking in Bed” - the “candle”, the “half-drunk wine” - these remain comfortingly common-place in a situation that could be the same from Helsinki to Osaka – depending on the winter weather. In a direct comparison these props render “Talking in Bed” even bleaker. Cunningly, the speaker also leaves it open whether the footprints have come and gone the previous evening or have come the previous evening and have left in the morning. It is thus the task of the reader to decide which scenario he or she would rather like to identify with. The careful expression “touching joy” functions similarly as it can either be read as “the joy of touching” or “the joy of deep emotional contact”.

The final sentiment in “Morning at last...” is also reminiscent of the sentiment expressed in “An Arundel Tomb” only this time “what will survive of us is love” stands freely without Larkin’s post-script. What survives the night, the “touching joy”, is emotion “whether as happiness or pain”. No matter how explicitly this memory of “joy” is to be read, it remains – literally and figuratively – almost exactly at the centre of the poem. Whereas the topos of the window in Larkin, whether in “The Whitsun Weddings” or “High Windows”, usually denotes a certain unattainability and thus a heightened sense of solitude and lack of human contact, “Morning at last...” is one of the few poems in which a longing look out of the window brings home the reality and warmth of human relationships: of “your life walking into mine”.

Despite the conventional rhyme scheme and brevity, the emotion of “Morning at last...” bubbles under the surface of its unagitated sincerity. Maybe not quite as intense as “Talking in Bed” it is nonetheless one of Larkin’s few poems that betray a sort of tenderness. The sparse props, the speaker’s unobtrusiveness and the subtle sincerity allow for the reader – irrespective of age, gender or cultural background – to identify with the emotion of the poem. “Morning at last...” is one of Larkin’s least ironic love

poems.

“Sad Steps”, on the other hand, gently breaks the idea of human transience to the reader. Rodney Stenning Edgecombe in his essay “Larkin’s ‘Sad Steps’ and the Augustan night piece” brilliantly captures the poem’s close up evocation of the speaker’s movement that is presented by way of an “amplified Italian sonnet”.¹³ The intimate movement to which I would like to draw attention is the one that reveals itself through the personal pronouns Larkin uses. Whereas the speaker makes use of the first person singular in the second line in the first stanza “I part thick curtains...”, the next time he surfaces again is in the first line of the fifth stanza, where the previous “I” is transformed into the more general “One” (“One shivers slightly...”). The next personal pronoun refers no longer to the speaker but to the phenomenon of being young. “[I]t can’t come again” [emphasis mine]. The poem thus makes an almost sweeping movement from “I” to the more general “One” to something to which every reader can more or less sadly agree: he or she will never be as young as they were when they went to bed. The speaker’s isolation paradoxically evokes some kind of community of loneliness. Youth is undiminished for “others” – not for “all the others”. Death is only hinted at through the transience of youth. As in so many others of Larkin’s poems death hovers just outside the peripheral vision. It is this hovering that is terrifying, not the event of death itself.

The “amplified sonnet” and the title of “Sad Steps” deliberately play with Sidney’s *Stella and Astrophil* (apparently Larkin was named after Sir Philip Sidney) and firmly

¹³ Rodney Stenning Edgecombe, “Larkin's "Sad Steps" and the Augustan night piece” in: *Twentieth Century Literature*, Winter 2008, Vol. 54 Issue 4, p. 494: “Secondly, he seems also to have prompted the shape of "Sad Steps," which takes the form an amplified Italian sonnet with a 12-line "first position" instead of the customary octave, and, after the volta centered on the negative in line 12, a sestet into which the tercets slot themselves comfortably, having earlier suggested the halt cautiousness of the author's passage--first step, second step, pause; first step, second step, pause--to the lavatory and back.”

ground the invocation of the moon via its diction (“groping”, “piss”) and line structure (“O wolves of memory! Immensements! No,” with this last exclamation “No,” denying the Romantic grandeur of the moon: the speaker merely “shivers slightly”). The “clouds that blow/Loosely as cannon-smoke” remind the reader of the “wind-rent cloud” in Coleridge’s “To The Autumnal Moon” and thus point into the direction of the evocation of a very English literary tradition. However, nothing within the poem – neither the moon, nor the clouds, or roofs or gardens – hint at a specifically English background. Indeed, the invocation of the moon is a literary commonplace: Goethe writes “An den Mond”, Storm praises “Mondlicht”, Baudelaire laments “Tristesse de la lune” and Verlaine has his “La lune blanche”. It is neither Larkin’s primary aim to record literary traditions or to make visible a particular cultural environment. His aim is to “construct a verbal device that will reproduce [an] emotional concept in anyone who cares to read it, *anywhere, anytime*” [emphasis mine]. Readers in “*different times and places*” [emphasis mine] will make use of the poem (“the verbal device”) to re-create “in themselves what the poet felt when he wrote it.”¹⁴ What Larkin stresses here is the idea of identification on the part of the reader and the reader’s recognition “Yes, I know what you mean, life *is* like that!” that cannot be culturally narrow for a poem to be successful. Life and death as subjects of poetry are instantly recognizable to any reader and thus have a timeless and universal quality. “This does not mean it [the poem] will always be a simple and non-intellectual thing.”¹⁵

Larkin’s “The View” illustrates this point. Its central metaphor likens the passing of time and the approach to death to climbing a mountain and directly corresponds with the metaphor in Larkin’s “The Old Fools” (“extinction’s alp” and “The peak that stays in view wherever we go”), written less than half a year later, and “the sure extinction

¹⁴ *RW*, p. 80

¹⁵ *FR*, p. 78

that we travel to” in “Aubade”. The rhyme scheme ababb might correspond to John Donne’s “Hymn to God, my God, in my Sickness” in which the speaker contemplates his own death but rejoices because “death doth touch the resurrection”, but ideas of transcendence are completely absent from “The View”. The rhyme scheme seems to fall back on itself (instead of progressing to c, it falls back to b) which emphasizes the speaker’s perception of the futility of his progress: “The track breaks at my toecaps/And drops away in mist.” The expectation raised in the title and the first stanza (“The view is fine”) is deftly crushed as, quite simply, “The view does not exist.” The poem could stop on this almost wittily resigned line, but homes in on the speaker in the third and last stanza.

The adjectives “Overweight and shifty” that characterize the first person singular speaker in the first stanza, are further qualified in the third stanza: in Larkin’s characteristic negative prefixes, we learn that the speaker is “Unchilded and unwifed” and in his isolation all the more clear about how fast the end of his life is approaching. The choice of the adjective “drear” in its phonetic proximity to “dear” emphasises the neologisms of “Unchilded and unwifed” – the speaker is completely isolated in the face of death, “So final. And so near.” The brevity of these two statements underlines the inevitability of the end. That death is final is clear, but the second statement starting with the conjunction “and” almost as a second thought hides beneath its almost laconic resignation the real terror: death is never far off and becomes more of a reality the older one gets. It is interesting in this context that instead of highlighting the inevitability of death by sketching the movement of (a personified) death towards the helpless speaker, Larkin lets his speaker actively progress towards “extinction’s alp” thus creating a more hauntingly human image of life perceived as progress – but progress only towards one single aim.

In a way similar to that in “Sad Steps” Larkin creates an isolated speaker who is highlighted against a set of others. In “The View” the speaker is highlighted against “Experienced climbers”. However, this group of others with whom the speaker has obviously engaged (“Experienced climbers say”) is only one portion of the overall community with which the speaker connects. There is the speaker on the one hand and the experienced climbers on the other hand, but this does not exclude the possibility of other isolated ‘climbing rookies’ like the speaker. What Larkin sets up here is an “imagined community” in the Andersonian sense that becomes all the more credible and all the more human by singling out one constituent part of the community.¹⁶ The speaker in “The View” with his age, overweight and singleness is far from standing out in a crowd. His all too apparent weaknesses render him particularly and painfully human and allow the reader to identify with him. Isolation, solitude, loneliness and a fear of death are common human sentiments, expressions of a common humanity.

“The View” is thus effectively devoid of a mediated cultural identity on the part of the speaker. Whereas the “lost lanes of Queen Anne’s lace” in Larkin’s “Cut Grass” may point at a marginally more English context, the “flowered lanes that twist” do not entail such cultural markers in “The View”. However, it needs to be noted that the “lost lanes of Queen Anne’s lace” in “Cut Grass” create a credible background to the sentiment of the poem. Additionally, the more colloquial name of the flower is simply more poetic. The speaker could just as well have referred more exactly and scientifically to “wild carrot” or “*daucus carota*”, but these words lack the music and the cultural credibility that anchors him in the wider context of a common humanity. Indeed, cultural markers are merely what we make of them in the same way that cultural identities are never fixed identities. “Cultures ‘work’ like green timber, and [...] never constitute finished

¹⁶ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, London, 1991

totalities.”¹⁷

Jean-François Bayart in his tellingly titled *The Illusion of Cultural Identity* even goes as far as to declare: “There is no such thing as identity.” He somewhat qualifies this statement by saying

There is no such thing as identity, only operational acts of identification. The identities we talk about so pompously, as if they existed independently of those who express them, are made (and unmade) only through the mediation of such identificatory acts, in short, by their enunciation.¹⁸

This is actually less radical than Bayart makes it sound. Bayart does not suggest that identity as such is non-existent; by changing the term “identity” to “acts of identification” he merely stresses the fluent, unfixed nature of identity. Identity can only ever be pinned down “at a specific historic moment, in given circumstances and for a limited time”¹⁹ before the pieces of the jigsaw that constitutes cultural identity change their position again and show a picture that might be very similar to the previous one, or completely different. Bayart highlights this idea with another illuminating example:

[S]omeone from Saint-Malo will define himself as a resident of that town when dealing with someone from Rennes, as a Breton when dealing with someone from Paris, as French when dealing with someone from Germany, as White when dealing with an African, as a worker when dealing with his boss, as a Catholic when dealing with a Protestant, as a husband when dealing with his wife and as an ill person when dealing with his doctor. Each of these ‘identities’ is ‘presumed’, as Max Weber says of ethnicity, and may promote integration into a social group, for example into the political sphere, without itself alone founding such a group. As corollary, none of these ‘identities’ exhausts the panoply of identities at an individual’s proposal.²⁰

Bayart illustrates the contextual phenomenon of different cultural identities from a French perspective, since he is French himself and picks his examples from direct experience. Anthony Birch uses a similar example from the English context:

¹⁷ Marc Augé, *Non-place Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, transl. by John Howe, Verso, London, 1995, p. 22

¹⁸ Bayart 2005, p. 92

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 93

²⁰ Ibid., p. 92/3

The present author [...] is identified as a Londoner when in the north of England, an Englishman when in Scotland, a European when in Africa, a Canadian when crossing the 49th parallel, a White when in Harlem, and a *middle-class male almost everywhere else*.²¹ [emphasis mine]

In its final point, however, the quotation by Birch – the highlighted final point in particular – does much more to underline Bayart's point than his own example. Whereas Bayart merely demonstrates the plurality of possible identities, Birch's "middle-class male" resembles the lowest common denominator in a mathematical equation. It is something that most people in the world – "almost everywhere else" – can share and relate to. Birch states he is a Londoner, but he is also a middle-class male. On a worldwide scale it is easier to identify with a middle-class male (male world population: ca. 3.3 billion) than with a Londoner (male and female London population: ca. 7.5 million).

What Birch's example thus points out clearer than Bayart's is what Bayart introduces as "common humanity" – one of the factors that transcend ethnic and narrow cultural identity. Indeed, common humanity is the lowest common denominator in Larkin's *oeuvre*. Asked about the autobiographical context of *A Girl in Winter*, Larkin replied that he had shared the experience of being miserable and lonely but "wasn't a girl" and "wasn't foreign".²² Hidden in this somewhat laconic reply lies the conviction that common human emotions – loneliness and displacement on the part of Katherine Lind in his novel – will transcend notions of any specific cultural or even gender context in literature. Wordsworth puts this more concisely in his *Preface*: the task of good writing is to give

²¹ Quoted in: Anthony Easthope, *Englishness and National Culture*, Routledge, Abingdon, 1999, p. 30

²² *FR*, p. 33

immediate pleasure to a human Being possessed of that information which may be expected from him, not as a lawyer, a physician, a mariner, an astronomer, or a natural philosopher, but as a Man.²³

Adding the prefix “hu-“ to Wordsworth’s final “man” clarifies his meaning.

Bayart mentions the myriad of intermingling (cultural) identities. So far we have stressed that common humanity embraces and transcends the various other human identities. The Stoics in ancient Greece illustrate the different cultural identities as concentric circles:

The first one is drawn around the self; the next takes in one’s immediate family; then follows the extended family; then, in order, one’s neighbors or local group, one’s fellow city dwellers, one’s fellow countrymen – and we can easily add to this list groupings based on ethnic, linguistic, historical professional, gender and sexual identities.²⁴

Illustrated, these concentric circles neatly underline the different spheres of identity.

²³ Wordsworth 2008, p. 163

²⁴ Martha Nussbaum, “Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism” from *The Boston Review*, 1994, accessed online 19/04/09 <http://www.bsos.umd.edu/gvpt/Theory/Patriotism%20and%20Cosmopolitanism.pdf>

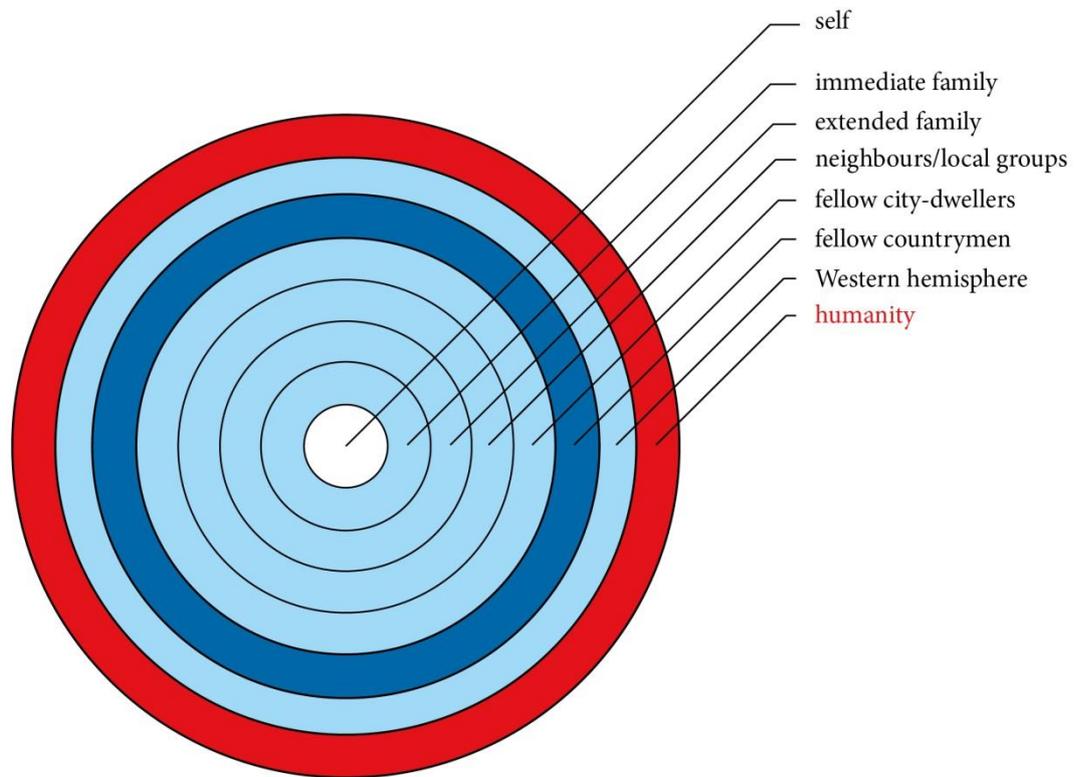


Illustration 1: The Stoics' concentric circles

The circles visually underline the idea that specific cultural identities are only one of many identities. The circles furthermore suggest that it may not be necessary to assign a specific cultural identity, e.g. national identity, a pre-eminent role among the many different cultural identities that are available to a human being.

[N]o matter what national identity claims for itself, it can never be more than one among many. [...] Besides the family, identities extend in overlapping circles into work and leisure, ethnic and sub-cultural identities as well as local and regional ones, and, above the national register, continental and potentially international identities.²⁵

David Miller confirms this impression by denying that “we are *rationaly* required to make our nationality a constitutive part of our personal identity, or that having a

²⁵ David Miller, *On Nationality*, Clarendon Press, Alderley, 1995, p. 23

national identity excludes having collective identities of other kinds.”²⁶

He further notes that “nationality may seem to play a relatively peripheral role in the lives of people in advanced liberal societies.”²⁷ It is worthwhile pointing out that in this context Miller no longer uses the term “nation” but substitutes “society” indicating that there are cultural identities that are not congruent with national borders.

Eliot in his “Tradition and the Individual Talent” speaks of a “simultaneous existence” and a “simultaneous order” within “the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within [...] the whole of the literature of his [the writer’s] own country.”²⁸ The poet

must be aware that the mind of Europe – the mind of his own country – a mind which he learns in time to be more important than his own private mind – is a mind which changes, and that this change is a development which abandons nothing *en route*, which does not superannuate either Shakespeare or Homer, or the rock drawing of the Magdalenian draughtsmen.²⁹

There are some noteworthy points here. T.S. Eliot underlines that literature as a cultural artefact does not only stretch across national borders, but also across time. History is a necessary component of political and cultural geography. When Eliot speaks of the “European mind” he acknowledges that the poet would deny the full scope of his cultural identity if he only operated within the narrow borders of the nation. When David Gervais asks: “Is Goethe any less German for discovering part of himself through Shakespeare?”³⁰ we may respond: Goethe is no less German for following a particular supra-national tradition, but it certainly shows that he is so much more than *just* German.

In the same way that Eliot emphasizes the constantly changing surface in the pool of all literature ever written, ‘culture’ as such is also a moving target. Larkin himself,

²⁶ Miller 1995, p. 11

²⁷ Miller 1995, p. 14

²⁸ T.S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent” in: T.S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood Essays on Poetry and Criticism*, Methuen&Co. Ltd., London, 1950, p. 49

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 50

³⁰ David Gervais, “Englands of the Mind” in: *Critical Quarterly* Vol. 30, No. 2, 2001, p. 167

however, criticizes Pound's and Eliot's view on modernism that seems to imply "that you can order culture whole, that it is a separate item on the menu."³¹ This view is confirmed by Bayart who attacks the concept of "culturalism" which

maintains that a 'culture' is composed of a stable, closed corpus of representations, beliefs or symbols that is supposed to have an 'affinity' – the word is used by de Toqueville as well as by Max Weber – with specific opinions, attitudes or modes of behaviour.³²

In order to illustrate his point, Bayart employs the example of the genocide in Rwanda in 1994 pointing out the fact that the violent conflict between the Hutu and the Tutsi was reduced in most analyses to questions of ethnic identity. He, in contrast, underlines the non-ethnic social and political undercurrents of the war:

The ethno-substantialist argument overlooks the fact that, just because one is Hutu or Tutsi, *one does not cease to be human* – a prey to fears, but also to preferences, to self-interested calculations or acts of generosity that are not entirely determined by identity-related membership in a group.³³ [emphasis mine]

What Bayart illustrates here are the dangers of missing the 'big picture' when restricting certain conflicts, problems, every-day occurrences or even literature to questions of national or ethnic identity. We are missing the 'big picture' by reading Larkin's work through the blurred lens of a specific cultural identity when the biggest circle of common humanity is visible even to the naked eye. "What strikes [Larkin] in particular things is not their differences but what they have in common."³⁴ Or, to put it more precisely in Larkin's own words: "the kind of response from the reader is, Yes, I know what you mean, life *is* like that; and for readers not only now but in the future, and *not only in England but anywhere in the world.*"³⁵ [emphasis mine]

³¹ *FR*, p. 19

³² Bayart 2005, p. 33

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 23

³⁴ David Gervais, *Literary Englands Versions of 'Englishness' in Modern Writing*, Cambridge University Press, 1993, p.210/21

³⁵ *FR*, p. 78

No, I have never found the place

In the individual poems discussed so far we have repeatedly noted Larkin's speakers' unease in the face of an acknowledged, but not accepted (imagined) community. Larkin's speakers are hardly ever as cheerfully themselves as the speaker of Betjeman's "A Subaltern's Love-Song" or as trustworthy of a crowd as in MacNeice's "Wolves"; they more often than not remain wary not only of the crowd they are observing, but also of themselves. Discussing Larkin's "The Whitsun Weddings", Robert Lance Snyder ponders on this specific lack of trust in the self:

If postmodern consciousness is unanchored by the premise of a unified, coherent, or autotelic 'self', it also is unmoored [...] from any commitment to the idea of 'rootedness'. [...] The importance and immediacy of place, in other words, dissolve once context is disconnected from a teleological interpretation of human history.³⁶

Whereas Snyder in his essay is primarily concerned with the analysis of the sacred/sacramental and the profane/secular in Larkin's *oeuvre*, he touches on an important point: place. For Snyder the "idea of place is a culturally negotiated category" within the post-modern society; the idea of place as anthropological site – a "site of intersection between memory and human identity"³⁷ – is no longer viable. Place and cultural identity are thus no longer directly connected. At first glance this rootlessness seems to correspond to the (post-) modern concept of cosmopolitanism.

Snyder's perception of place draws on the views of the French anthropologist Marc Augé. Augé coins the term "non-place" and replaces "post-modernity" with "supermodernity". Supermodernity characterizes the modern condition in which the ego

³⁶ Robert Lance Snyder, "'Elbowing Vacancy': Philip Larkin's Non-Places" in: *Papers on Language and Literature*, Spring 2007;43;2, p. 115

³⁷ Snyder 2007, p. 140/1

is overly conscious of history (“events we believe will count in the eyes of future historians and to which each of us, while fully aware that our part in them is [...] insignificant [...] can attach some circumstance or image of a personal, particular nature”³⁸) and space. Under these conditions fellow anthropologist’s Marcel Mauss’s idea of “a whole ethnological tradition with the idea of a culture located in time and space”³⁹ no longer holds. Whereas “modernity does not obliterate” the ancient temporalities of space and merely “pushes them into the background”, “supermodernity produces non-places, meaning spaces which are not themselves anthropological places.”⁴⁰ Augé does not neglect the idea of an imagined community in supermodernity when he states that the individual is more “explicitly affected by collective history” than ever before, but he also emphasizes that “reference points for collective identification”⁴¹ have never been so few. Augé’s supermodernity is the place

where people are born in the clinic and die in hospital; where transit points and temporary abodes are proliferating under luxurious or inhuman conditions [...]; where a dense network of means of transport which are also inhabited spaces is developing; where the habitué of supermarkets, slot machines and credit cards communicates wordlessly, through gestures, with an abstract, unmediated commerce; a world thus surrendered to *solitary individuality*, to the fleeting, the temporary and ephemeral.⁴² [emphasis mine]

Following Augé’s elaborations it seems all too simple to locate non-places in Larkin’s poetry. “The Building” is a hospital; “Mr Bleaney”’s successor stays at a “temporary abode”; “The Whitsun Weddings”, “I Remember, I Remember” and to a certain extent “Here” rely on “means of transport” – the train – and “The Large Cool Store” is a department store. If non-places embrace purpose-built places of anonymity, then the hotel in “Friday Night at the Royal Station Hotel” surely qualifies as non-place.

³⁸ Augé 1995, p. 27

³⁹ Ibid., p. 34

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 77/8

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 37

⁴² Ibid., p. 78

Additionally, “solitary individuality” seems like a spot-on characterisation of Larkin’s unsociable speakers. It seems like Larkin consciously designs non-places in order to bypass the culturally loaded implications of place and to make his poems universally tangible – and tangibly universal.

When Augé states that the “traveller’s space may [...] be the archetype of *non-place*”⁴³, Larkin’s “Autobiography at an Air-Station” from 1953 – one of the few of his poems concerned with air-travel – may help illustrate the concept. For the sake of the argument I will not take into account the biographical background to the poem (Larkin in Belfast; his entanglement with Patsy Strang).

Taking the form of a slightly crooked English sonnet (ababcdcd – efgefg) with only two visible stanzas, “Autobiography at an Air-Station” deals with an occurrence common in increased air-traffic these days: a delayed flight. The repetition “delay” in the first two lines underlines the effect of time passing. However, the as-yet-unidentified speaker is willing to graciously accept a slight delay, comforting himself with commonplaces: “Delay, well, travellers must expect/Delay”. Asking “For how long?” sparks the familiar reaction at airports: “No one seems to know.” Going over the entire process in his mind – “with all the luggage weighed, the tickets checked” he concludes “It can’t be *long...*”, but the italics and the trailing ending to the sentence betray the speaker’s uneasiness: he is not exactly sure whether his calculations are correct.

Interestingly, the speaker in the first three and half lines remains obscure; there is no personal or possessive pronoun. He could be any one of the passengers. Only in the second half of the fourth line is there a personal pronoun “we” as the speaker describes how the amorphous crowd of waiting passengers tries to kill time. This group

⁴³ Ibid., p. 88

identification is interesting and – as we have seen in the discussion of the poems above – a relatively rare occurrence in Larkin's poetry. Despite appearing only once, the first person plural pronoun "we" describes a veritable bustle: "We amble to and fro,/Sit in steel chairs, buy cigarettes and sweets/And tea, unfold the papers." The pace quickens towards the end of the enumeration with its unnecessary conjunction "cigarettes *and* sweets/And tea" [emphasis mine] and thus betrays the passengers' mounting agitation and impatience. In an uncharacteristic move the speaker in "Autobiography at an Air-Station" consciously – and representatively for all the other passengers as he is still not identified – asks himself whether it would be a good move to talk to someone, "Perhaps make friends?" to counter that with a definitive "No: in the race for seats/You're best alone." The second person singular pronoun "you" still does not denote a specific person in its capacity as a substitute for a generalized "one". We are still looking at "passengers" here, not "a passenger". The strict "no" is further intensified by what almost sounds like a scolding phrase from the traveller's informal rule-book: "Friendship is not worth while."

It is only in the sonnet's sestet that the speaker himself surfaces. Leaping from the mildly annoyed impatience of the first stanza into the second stanza we learn that "six hours" have passed. It might be due to this individual exasperation at the waiting time that we finally meet the speaker in person, as a first person singular pronoun: "if I'd gone by boat last night/I'd be there now." His (or her) laconic "Well, it's too late for that" stands in marked contrast with the almost conversational "well" in the poem's first line. When in the first line it was still a good-natured "well" that denoted a willingness to put up with a slight delay, the second "well" turns acrid. With this bitter comment, the speaker seems spent. The group of passengers that was identified as a weak community by the previous stanza's "we" seems to have disappeared. Only the kiosk

girl's yawn – the kiosk girl not as part of the community but as part of an airport's inventory – mirrors the speaker's forced repose. While the speaker's laconic bitterness almost inexplicably turns into "fear" we once more see that the speaker is not a seasoned traveller – as opposed to the speaker in "Naturally the Foundation will Bear Your Expenses". Where professional travellers stretch out on the steel chairs under their coats resigned to their cosmopolitan fate, the speaker stares out of the terminal's glass panes, notes night coming on – "as light/Begins to ebb outside"- and is struck by fear because he will not arrive as planned: he "set/So much on this Assumption." Despite the religious undertones the capitalization of "assumption" might hold for some readers⁴⁴, I would like to suggest that Larkin chooses this capital letter to emphasize the importance of this "taking to the sky" for the speaker. Larkin makes use of the same word "assumption" in "How Distant" where the term similarly denotes great expectations. The finality and bitterness of the final sentence "Now it's failed." will be familiar to frequent travellers who have at one point or another missed a connecting train or flight. There always is a feeling of helpless emptiness when one is suspended neither here nor there but somewhere in-between, in transit. The absence of a final couplet as in the typical English sonnet mirrors this sense of incompleteness.

Booth notes that in "Autobiography at an Air-Station" Larkin appears uncharacteristically "world-weary" and "cosmopolitan".⁴⁵ The poem is an exact manifestation of Augé's non-place. Whereas the speakers in the poems discussed so far always draw a clear line between themselves and others and thus steer clear of an all too easily perceived imagined cultural community, the speaker in "Autobiography at an Air-Station" even considers actively engaging with the faceless crowd. The speaker in

⁴⁴ Jesus's Assumption is celebrated some time between April and June; Mary's Assumption in the religious calendar is celebrated in August. Larkin wrote the poem in December.

⁴⁵ Booth 2005, p. 78

“Autobiography at an Air-Station” considers “making friends” and “friendship” twice in as many lines. Interestingly, the cover of Augé’s volume exactly mirrors the situation in Larkin’s poem: isolate travellers are slumped in plastic-and-steel chairs in an airport waiting room, with the front of a plane just visible behind large windows. The sky is dark.

What we have termed ‘uncharacteristic’ for Larkin in this poem so far gains another dimension in the sphere of the non-place. Augé stresses the anonymity and the sameness of the traveller who is only identified as an individual when he has to confirm his identity:

The passenger through non-places retrieves his identity only at Customs, at the tollbooth, at the check-out counter. Meanwhile, he obeys the same code as others, receives the same messages, responds to the same entreaties. The space of non-place creates neither singular identity nor relations; only solitude, and similitude.⁴⁶

Thus, the question of identification and non-identification with a group is less uncharacteristic of Larkin than it seems at first glance. A non-place such as an airport creates an imagined community of travellers. As these travellers have no “singular identity” or visible “relations” it is simultaneously deceptively simple and impossible to become part of this community. This is why Larkin’s speaker in the first stanza recognizes a community but can only turn to himself in the second stanza. This movement towards the self, towards the emptiness, disappointment and incompleteness of the road not taken, is not only typically Larkin, but recognizably human. As the speaker turns inwards – away from the anonymous stylings and the temporary ‘inhabitants’ of the non-place – he paradoxically turns towards the reader; the airport turns into a recognizable place of human emotion. The speaker’s very real, very human disappointment returns to him the “usual determinants” that the non-place takes from

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 103

the travellers. The 'inhabitant' of the non-place "becomes no more than what he does or experiences in the role of passenger, customer or driver"⁴⁷; Larkin's speaker retains his individual humanity.

Indeed, place and non-place in Augé are never mutually exclusive: "Place and non-place are rather like opposed polarities: the first is never completely erased, the second never totally completed; they are like palimpsest on which the scrambled games of identity and relations are ceaselessly rewritten."⁴⁸ Larkin's treatment of non-place recognizes the largest Stoic circle - common humanity. When anthropological place in Augé is "formed by individual identities, through complicities of language, local references, the unformulated rules of living know-how" and non-place merely "creates the shared identity of passengers, customers or Sunday drivers"⁴⁹ then Larkin finds a balance between the two – much like the rooted cosmopolitan. While anthropological place *per se* would be connected to a specific cultural community, non-place only recognizes the ghost of a community in which the individual disappears. Larkin acknowledges the existence of a fickle community but refuses to abandon individual identity which in turn – and maybe paradoxically – opens up to the larger human community. While non-place should by definition be an entity apart from the Stoics' "identity circles" altogether, Larkin finds an intersection between non-place and common humanity. It is within this intersection that "Autobiography at an Airstation" is located.

"Friday Night in the Royal Station Hotel", written 13 years later, almost directly mirrors "Autobiography at an Air-Station". The hotel as another "transit point", a

⁴⁷ Augé 1995, p. 103

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 79

⁴⁹ Ibid., 1995, p.101

“temporary abode”⁵⁰ qualifies as non-place in Augé’s sense. Both poems are crooked English sonnets; “Friday Night...” possibly a little more so than “Autobiography...”. Strikingly, the props of both poems are almost the same. While in “Autobiography at an Air-Station” “light/Begins to ebb outside”, “Light spreads darkly downwards from the high/Clusters of lights” in “Friday Night in the Royal Station Hotel”. The day slowly ends while the speaker contemplates the emptiness of the business hotel that is busiest during the week and deserted at the weekends. Similarly to “Autobiography...”, the speaker in “Friday Night...” remains unidentified. However, the crowd the speaker in “Friday Night...” witnesses is long gone: “all the salesmen have gone back to Leeds”, but the ghost of the fickle community lingers on – probably along with the smell: “Leaving full ashtrays in the Conference Room”. The airport-crowd sits “in steel chairs”; the conference room at the hotel boasts only “empty chairs/That face each other, coloured differently”. These chairs function as a substitute for the departed crowd. Their presence is still felt and the speaker’s emptiness and isolation thus even more tangible. The “empty chairs” are almost personified; in the absence of chattering humans, the “dining-room declares/A larger loneliness of knives and glass”. As the speaker is not identified by direct speech or a revealing personal pronoun he almost seems to haunt the hotel as a ghost does contemplating “silence laid like carpet” and empty “shoeless corridors”. Much like the yawning “kiosk girl” in “Autobiography...”, the “porter” in “Friday Night...” is treated like part of the hotel’s inventory. His presence does nothing to alleviate the speaker’s isolation. The indefinite article “a” instead of the definite “the” hints at the porter’s complete strangeness. The definite article would at least acknowledge the porter as manning his correct position; the indefinite article merely acknowledges the porter’s presence without any personal

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 78

concern on the part of the speaker. This goes hand in hand with the poem's title: "Friday Night *at* the Royal Station Hotel" would allow for some kind of identification on the part of the speaker (Yes, this is where he is staying.) while "Friday Night *in* the Royal Station Hotel" unconcernedly notes the proceedings (none) in the hotel.

Judging from the two poems, Larkin identifies the resort to papers and magazines as the automatic human reaction to non-place; the action that seems least personal and merely designed to kill time. In "Autobiography...", the crowd at the airport takes to "unfold[ing] the papers", while the porter in "Friday Night..." "reads an unsold evening paper". Judging from the speaker's uneasy awareness of the fading light in "Autobiography..." we can assume that he does not have a paper to distract him from the painful passing of time; the same is true for "Friday Night...": the speaker will not be distracted. The less he is distracted the more acute his loneliness. The traveller's tactic of opening a paper as a means wordlessly to signify "do not disturb" does not seem an option to the speaker. Instead, all the others seem to open papers isolating speakers that battle various manifestations of loneliness and desolation.

The pace in "Autobiography..." is quicker, mirroring the airport's bustle and mounting impatience whereas "Friday Night..." is curiously muted. In the context of the airport with its timetables, panels and ever-present clocks the passing of time is much more clearly noted. While in "Autobiography..." "Six hours pass", in "Friday Night..." "Hours pass" making the passing of time even more sluggish and painful. The imagery of light ("light spreads darkly", "clusters of light", "the lights burn") is not the expression of overwhelming joy but renders the scene even more desolate in the lights' artificiality. In the muted atmosphere with "silence laid like carpet" – the hotel's plush carpet *is* bound to swallow every noise – it becomes easy to picture the inside of the Royal Station Hotel in the sepia tones of old black-and-white movies. Sticking to this

image for a moment, it is equally easy to picture the almost translucent body of the ghost-speaker or ghost-writer, if you will - especially as Larkin refuses to identify the speaker by personal pronouns.

Most of the poems discussed so far explore a more or less prominent tension between a speaker and a faceless crowd. In the absence of the crowd (“all the salesmen have gone back to Leeds”), the individual pales, too. Discussing non-place, Augé states that “individuals, however simple we imagine them to be, are never quite simple enough to become detached from the order that assigns them a position”⁵¹ underlining the impossibility of individuality independent of community. Thus, “Friday Night...” not only mirrors “Autobiography...” but transcends it. Whereas the speaker in “Autobiography...” can fall back upon his individual failed expectations and consciously decides against aligning himself with the crowd, the curiously disembodied speaker in “Friday Night...” suffers not only the full backlash of the implications of non-place, but also – on a much more fundamental level – the absence of a defining other.

When Augé defines the paradox of the non-place – “a foreigner lost in a country he does not know [...] can feel at home only on the anonymity of motorways, service stations, big stores or hotel chains”⁵² – we are bound to agree because we all know the feeling of relief when recognizing something familiar in a foreign and potentially threatening environment. However, “Friday Night in the Royal Station Hotel” proves Augé wrong. The speaker cannot possibly feel at home – “if home existed” - when his hotel is “Isolated, like a fort” and when there is no “other” with or against whom to assert one’s individuality. Augé’s non-places align their ‘inhabitants’ along the lines of “solitude” and “similitude”; when these options are not available, ultimate solitude

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 22

⁵² Ibid., p. 106

beckons. "Friday Night at the Royal Station Hotel" thus turns into a kind of 'meta'-non-place where all human relations, however fickle, disappear. The speaker in "Autobiography..." is still in a position to choose whether to conspire with the faceless crowd; the speaker in "Friday Night..." does not have this choice. It is the "end of choice" (compare "The Building") that inspires naked fear. For Larkin, the "end of choice" equals death; an image that befits the impression of the poem's speaker as discarnate ghost.

Despite the absence of relations, history and identity as supplied by anthropological, 'proper' place in "Friday Night in the Royal Station Hotel" – the unavailability of "home" (mentioned twice in the final lines of the poem) as the ultimate antidote to anonymous non-place emphasizes the lack of 'proper' place – something in the poem remains recognizable: the very real, very human feeling of isolation. The stylings of a place may simply be recognizable; the human emotion is intimately familiar.

"The Building" plays similarly with notions of non-place. Interestingly enough, the first two stanzas liken the hospital – which is never explicitly mentioned in the poem – first to a "hotel" ("Higher than the handsomest hotel", whose alliteration conveys a sense of overwhelmed awe that is directly deflated by the scruffiness of the porters and the "frightening smell") and then to an "airport lounge". In "Autobiography at an Air-Station" the waiting travellers "Sit in steel chairs, buy [...] tea and unfold the papers"; the 'travellers' in "The Building" "sit on rows of steel chairs turning the ripped mags" and there is "tea at so much a cup". It is striking how Larkin conjures up the familiar image of the airport with almost exactly the same props only to deflate it again. The 'travellers' "who tamely sit" are no travellers at all. In fact they "haven't come far" unlike the travellers in "Autobiography at an Airstation". And whereas the travellers at the airport willingly choose to bury themselves in their papers, the "ripped mags" have

nothing in common with the travellers' reading habits. Curiously, Larkin makes use of yet another image of transit when he concludes that the waiting room is more reminiscent of "a local bus". A non-place, the airport, is thus substituted by another non-place within the larger non-place of the hospital.

Unlike the "empty chairs" in "Friday Night...", the "steel chairs" in "The Building" are occupied by "faces restless and resigned". The *pars pro toto* "faces" for "people" underlines the unidentified speaker's uneasiness; he cannot concentrate on appearances. In opposition to the absent crowd in "Friday Night..." there is a very real crowd hiding behind the restless and resigned faces in "The Building". There even is a timid feeling of conspiracy when "Every few minutes comes a kind of nurse/To fetch someone away". The patient picked up by the nurse is isolated from the waiting crowd and soon forgotten when the frail conspiracy of the rest (who will be next?) resumes their uneasy waiting routine: "the rest refit/Cups back to saucers, cough, or glance below/Seats for dropped gloves or cards." The accumulation of sharp c-plosives in these few lines ("cups", "coughs", "cards", "caught", "curiously") onomatopoeically mirror the nervous/ill sounds of people coughing in the waiting room. Despite the frail conspiracy of the waiting crowd this crowd is marked out unreally from the rest. These humans are suddenly "on ground curiously neutral". This expression is especially interesting in the context of non-place. The speaker in Larkin's "Places, Loved Ones" has "never found the place" where he could say "*This is my proper ground*". Place in this context would be Augé's anthropological place that holds relations, history and specific identity. The place most intimately bound up with these relations is home.

If place is everything non-place is not, then the implications of "home" – if home existed – in "Friday Night..." are even bleaker. There is nothing to counter the emptiness and solitude of the non-place. In "Autobiography..." the speaker would like

to be *there* (“if I’d gone by boat last night/I’d be *there* by now”[emphasis mine]). We cannot automatically assume that “there” is congruent with “home”, but we can at least set the desired “there” against the unsatisfactory “here” of the airport lounge. The airport lounge is merely a transit point; “there” is the end of at least this journey, a destination. In the same way the crowd in “The Building” is “picked out of” the regular working day. They are not on their proper ground, their “homes and names/Suddenly in abeyance”; the “stable sense” that Larkin elaborates in “Maturity” is no longer a given. The hospital as non-place sucks up individual identity and leaves the people in the waiting room with the anonymous “shared identity of passengers, customers or Sunday drivers”⁵³ – or patients, for that matter.

The frail nature of the crowd’s unspoken conspiracy is underlined in the fifth stanza: “their eyes/Go to each other, guessing”. The patients are compromising the frail conspiracy by furtively trying to figure out whose illness is the more serious but confronted with a tellingly undefined “Someone” who is “wheeled past, in washed-to-rags ward clothes” they tacitly acknowledge a new, frightening community: “To realise/This new thing held in common makes them quiet”.

The almost Escher-like or even Kafkaesque image of “rooms, and rooms past those,/ And more rooms yet, each one further off/And harder to return to from” raises an additional point: Larkin’s non-places do not seem to have doors to lock out or lock in solitude. While the speaker in “Best Society” almost gleefully locks his door (“Viciously, then, I lock my door.”) and rejoices in the warmth and solitude that give room to his true, fulfilled identity, Larkin’s non-places do not offer such repose. The airport lounge in “Autobiography...” is vast and full of people. If there are any doors (and we only know of large windows through which the speaker can watch the daylight

⁵³ Ibid., p. 101

fade), they are most certainly of the revolving variety and do not lead to any privacy. The dining-room in “Friday Night...” declares loneliness “Through open doors”. There is literally no room to assert individuality. In “The Building” all the rooms seem to be interconnected; if one was to have a room to oneself, one would at least have to lock two doors – if the ER-style swinging doors have locks at all, that is. “Mr Bleaney” in his “hired box” – certainly the “temporary abode” with which Augé characterizes non-place – merely notices that there is “no hook/Behind the door” and the fact that he can still hear his landlady’s television throws into a questionable light whether this door is good for locking things out.

This is why the “locked church” in the speaker’s sudden direct imperative “wait,/Look down at the yard.” in “The Building” becomes so appealing. It is not the emblem of unavailable religious transcendence; it is the promise of a *place*; of doors one can lock behind oneself out of choice. Indeed, the “locked church” with its promise of positive, freely chosen individual solitude echoes the “padlocked cube of light” from “Dry-Point” in which the poet can realize himself (in a clearly sexual context) despite its inherent unattainability. Much like the church in Larkin’s “Church-Going”, the one in “The Building” remains a place in Augé’s best anthropological meaning of the word. Despite the speaker’s judgement that “the *place* was not worth stopping for” [emphasis mine] in “Church-Going” his musings on what will happen once “churches fall completely out of use” characterize the church as *place*. The “dubious women”, the “ruin-bibber” or the “Christmas-addict” will recognize the church as “relational, historical and concerned with identity”⁵⁴ – Augé’s criteria for anthropological place – even after it has been left to “rain and sheep”.

Indeed, the suddenly roused speaker looking out of the hospital’s window in “The

⁵⁴ Augé 1995, p. 77

Building” sets place outside against the bleakness of the medical non-place. The enumeration of “Traffic; a locked church; short terraced streets/Where kids chalk games, and girls with hair-dos fetch/Their separates from the cleaners” conjures up the very real, very provincial place. The “short terraced streets” seem much easier to navigate than the hospital’s endless “corridors”. The almost pathetic exclamation “O world,/Your loves, your chances, are beyond the stretch/Of any hand from here!” marks the loss of the final straw as even the patients’ frail community crumbles. The ‘real world’ outside is transformed into the even ‘realer’ world of the hospital; the real world – *place* – is nothing more than “A touching dream”. It does not help that the speaker tries to prolong the doomed community by suddenly switching to the first person plural pronoun “we”: “we wake separately” and “each gets up and goes at last”. The crowd disperses.

Some will be out by lunch, or four;
Others, not knowing it, have come to join
The unseen congregations whose white rows
Lie set apart above – women, men;
Old, young; crude facets of the only coin/
This *place* accepts. [emphasis mine]

The dispersion of the frail community, the isolation of its constituent parts and the end of choice not only characterize the hospital as non-place but also hint at the ultimate non-place in which “solitude” and “similitude” no longer matter: death.

In “The Building”, however, there is hope. Crowds of visitors attempt to battle “The coming dark” each evening “With wasteful, weak, propitiatory flowers.” As long as the visitors keep coming, the individual is not without relations, history and identity even though the place is. The “wasteful, weak, propitiatory flowers” may be a futile gesture in the face of the ultimate non-place but it is exactly these flowers, the human gesture, that keep the non-place at bay. The human ritual establishes a human community that

transcends the solitude and similitude of the typical non-place.

By finally homing in on the individual and the universal human ritual, Larkin once more allows non-place to intersect with common humanity. The poems dealing with non-place seem to come at the Stoics' identity circles from the outside, intersecting with the outermost circle of common humanity.

Despite its many facets, "The Building" appears as a version of "Ambulances", written 11 years earlier. Whereas "Autobiography at an Air-Station", "Friday Night in the Royal Station Hotel" and "The Building" are paradoxical-sounding 'places of transit' or rather '*non*-places of transit' as we have seen, "Ambulances" is itself in transit. If it was not for the title giving it away, then the poem would have the same riddle-like quality that "The Building" has. Starting with a direct comparison "Closed like confessionals" the repetition of the dark vowel already sets the tone for the poem. The confessional appears as sinister and claustrophobic. Usually housed in churches that tend to count as 'safe' anthropological places, this confessional lacks the stable, reassuring quality of a monumental stone building: it is literally on the move. The idea of the "closed confessional" directly relates to the promise of the "locked church" in "The Building" but in this case, the effect is not of the promise of a safe place of beneficial solitude, but of claustrophobia which further intensifies in the course of the poem.

With "they thread" the first line already implies movement. Whereas ordinary traffic tends to move in straight lines, ambulances "thread" and are thus marked as something out of the ordinary. The oxymoronic construction "loud noons" in the second line only serves to illustrate the absorbent nature of the vehicles "giving back/None of the glances they absorb". In a similar way as the carpet in "Friday Night in the Royal Station Hotel" that absorbs all human sound, the vehicles in "Ambulances" appear as a sort of black

hole sucking in all energy without giving anything back. This is marked by the contrast to the general bustle, the “Loud noons of cities”. The frequent use of plural nouns that universalize “confessionals”, “noons”, “cities” and “ambulances” makes for an even more sinister effect: the same scene seems to take place everywhere; no particular place is singled out; no particular ambulance triggers the response. “All streets in time are visited.” Interestingly, “Ambulances” once more dispenses with a clearly identified speaker while the ambulances seem to move soundlessly, like ghosts.

The second stanza homes in on a curiously static scene detailing just another ordinary day. Children are “strewn on steps or road” and “women [are] coming from the shops/Past smells of different dinners”. However, the strange objectification of the children that are randomly “strewn” across the scene and the merest reference points to a family idyll with “women”, “shops” and “dinners” expose this idyll as a hastily jotted scene that pales in comparison to the imposing presence of an ambulance. The static nature of this fake, tranquil idyll is suddenly broken not by the arrival of an ambulance (no, it seems to have arrived as soundlessly as it glided through the traffic in the first stanza), but by “a wild white face that overtops/Red stretcher-blankets” and “is carried in and stowed”. The “faces restless and resigned” in “The Building” worked as *pars pro toto* for the waiting patients that were not worth further visual enquiry but the “wild white face” in “Ambulances” is more literal than that: one simply cannot see more of the person that is carried into the ambulance. That this is almost literal disembodiment - the loss of choice - is a distinct subtext.

Additionally, it is the abrupt burst of colour “white” and “red” set against the muted “grey” of the vehicle which underlines the suddenness of the incident. Once more the use of the indefinite article in “a face” denies the person any connection to the rudimentarily sketched community. The definite article would at least hint at some sort

of recognition but it seems like any connection is lost once the ambulance rips a person from their 'proper ground'. The ground is no longer even "curiously neutral" as in "The Building"; it is simply no longer there. The person, the "face", lies on a stretcher and has thus not only lost his or her contact to a certain community but literally to the ground. The fact that the person is "carried in and stowed" just like an object - and just like the children are "strewn on steps or road" - further highlights this idea. The ambulance's quiet menace also lies in the impression that there is no-one carrying the stretcher or driving the vehicle which is underlined by the passive form of the verbs. The vehicle remains curiously unmanned and thus empty of human affection and compassion, yes, even of human notice. People seem to look away not wanting to be drawn into the implications of the ambulance that signifies sickness and death.

After focussing on the patient in the second part of the second stanza, we return to the women and children who "sense the solving emptiness/That lies just under all we do". The verbs detailing the senses - "smells", "see" and "sense" - highlight this community as alive and in full control of their senses which is set against the patient's wildness and literal loss of all senses. One is almost reminded of the ageing speaker in Eliot's "Gerontion": "I have lost my sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch:/How should I use them for your closer contact?"⁵⁵ which is further channelled in Larkin's "Aubade" expressing the speaker's fear of dying: "no sight, no sound,/No touch or taste or smell, nothing to think with/Nothing to love or link with". The patient in the ambulance is literally 'out of touch' with the rest of the community. However, the static nature of the community of women and children only thinly veils the fact that the mere presence of the ambulance brings forth thoughts of death and emptiness. The community in its apparent vitality is suddenly too well aware of "the solving emptiness". This makes the

⁵⁵ T.S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1962*, Faber and Faber Ltd., London, 1974, p. 31

sudden use of the first person plural pronoun “we” that tends to identify the strength of the community even more laughable. The pronoun does neither identify a speaker nor express a community; it merely makes the point that in the long run, no-one gets away. The “permanent and blank and true” truth is that everyone dies. The enumeration with the repeated conjunction “and” enhances this effect.

As “the fastened doors recede” we are reminded of the absence of doors in “The Building”. Here, it is even worse: the patient neither actively closed these doors behind him nor is in a position to open them of his own accord. This is once more the end of individual choice after the end of individual recognition. The ambulance becomes a non-place of a slightly worse kind than “The Building”. In “The Building” people at least have a chance to leave as they wish; the ambulance remains tightly shut and it takes others that remain almost hauntingly invisible to open these doors again whenever they feel they ought.

The community that was left behind whispers “*poor soul*” but they do not refer to the poor soul in the ambulance. They refer to “their own distress”. The use of the third person plural pronoun “they” is telling in this context. Where the other poems discussed so far could set a “we” or “they” against an “I” of a singular individual or dispensed of personal pronouns altogether, the isolated “they” in “Ambulances” points out how the community has already removed the “wild white face” from their midst: “The years, the unique random blend of families and fashions, there/At last begin to loosen.” Relations, history and identity are lost in the non-place, “Unreachable inside a room/The traffic parts to let go by”. The “unique random blend of families and fashion” denotes place in Augé’s sense with the adjective “unique” pointing at an individual identity that is swallowed up by the non-place. The choice of word “room” in this context makes the non-place of the ambulance even more tangible. What should merely be a “place of

transit” or a “temporary abode” in Augé’s sense already appears as a final destination: unreachable. As if the vehicle itself was diseased, “the traffic parts”. Read against the background of the traffic that is part of the freedom of the ‘real world’ in “The Building” this becomes even more fatal.

The paradox of the receding ambulance that “brings closer what is left to come./And dulls to distance all we are” works nicely with its slightly warped perspective. What is left to come will eventually be death, the thought of which leaves us disoriented. The sense of movement that weaves through the poem (starting with “thread” in the first line, “borne away” in the fourth stanza, then “round” and “across”) similarly mirrors the disorientation. We are literally leaving behind “all we are”. The use of the pronoun “we” repeatedly signifies not the presence but the absence of a community by resorting to a commonplace. The community is not clearly identified and the pronoun is merely used to give weight to a general statement of resignation. Strikingly, the first person plural pronoun appears only twice in five stanzas, both times in a similar sentence structure. Read together, these lines distil the message of the poem: “emptiness that lies just under all we do dulls to distance all we are”. Despite the deceptive pronoun, the poem singles out the individual from a community that shies away as soon as the individual is associated with an ambulance. Losing the relation to the community equals losing individual identity.

“Ambulances” with its significantly “fastened doors” thus becomes another poem sketching a typical non-place in Augé’s sense relating to “the mobile cabins called ‘means of transport’ (aircraft, trains and road vehicles)”.⁵⁶ It remains a striking peculiarity, however, that travel by aircraft and train (prominently so) are featured in Larkin’s catalogue of non-place that even an ambulance features, but there is hardly a

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 79

word of travel by car. This might be due to the fact that Larkin learnt to drive and acquired a car rather late in his life, but I would also venture another suggestion. Despite the ironic undertone of “We can always escape in the car” in “Going, Going”, there seems to be a grain of truth in this statement. Augé does not elaborate on this, but the private car does not seem to qualify as non-place because it is an extension of our individual identity; a means of escape from anonymous non-place. The car thus turns into a kind of “padlocked cube of light”, a retreat where the driver can be fully himself: yet another retreat that seems unavailable to Larkin’s speakers.

Augé further states that the constant presence of overwhelming history that serves as a matrix for non-place triggers different individual reactions: “flight (back home, elsewhere), fear (of the self, of others), but also intensity of experience (performance) or revolt (against established values).”⁵⁷ Larkin’s *personae* seem to exhibit all these reactions at one point or another. Judging from the poems discussed so far, fear of the self *and* of others seems to be his speaker’s most common reaction to the encounter with non-place. If the community one would like to imagine is no longer clearly defined, the edges of the self start to blur.

But it is not only individual identity which becomes blurry. As Larkin’s speakers are in transit looking out of the windows of moving vehicles – especially moving trains – the outside world also starts to blur. One is reminded of J.M.W. Turner’s painting “Rain, Steam, and Speed – The Great Western Railway” from 1844 in which only the train itself and Maidenhead Bridge⁵⁸ are clearly defined while the outside world is lost in a whirl of blue and grey. Whereas one of the first travellers on a steam train in the Victorian age, the journalist Sydney Smith, could hardly contain his excitement with

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 120

⁵⁸ Painting accessed online 14/04/2010

<http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/server.php?show=conObject.167>

“everything is near, everything is immediate – time, distance, and delay are abolished”⁵⁹, supermodernity substitutes this overwhelming feeling of ultimate connectedness with isolation. “To the coexistence of worlds and the combined experience of anthropological place and something which is no longer anthropological place [...] movement adds the particular experience of a form of solitude.”⁶⁰

Louis MacNeice’s speaker in “Train to Dublin” particularly seems to pick up on this and directly contrasts time spent on a train with time spent outside of the train. Travel “causes a break or discontinuity between the spectator-traveller and the space of the landscape he is contemplating or rushing through. This prevents him from perceiving it as a place, from being fully present in it.”⁶¹ On the train, MacNeice’s speaker “can no more gather [his] mind up in [his] fist/Than the shadow of the smoke upon the grass.”⁶² As “the train’s rhythm never relents” and “telephone posts/Go striding backwards like the legs of time” (note the “movement of the fleeting images”⁶³ that Augé connects to solitary travellers; like “these English oaks/Flash past the windows” in Larkin’s early “Like the train’s beat”) the speaker counts “the buttons on the seat” (compare the “buttoned carriage-cloth” in Larkin’s “The Whitsun Weddings”), but is simultaneously struck by “the monotony of fear”. People on trains suddenly appear to him as heteronomous entities: “it is God has set us up as men who are painted wood,/And the trains carry us about.” MacNeice sketches a non-place where people are robbed of individual identities, but instantly follows with the evocation of place:

during a tiny portion of our lives we are not in trains
The idol living for a moment, not muscle-bound
But walking freely through the slanting rain

⁵⁹ Quoted in: Christoph Keep, “Technology and Information: Accelerating Developments”, in: Patrick Brantlinger&William Thesing (eds.), *A Companion to the Victorian Novel*, Blackwell Publishers Ltd., Oxford, 2002, p.137

⁶⁰ Augé 1995, p. 87

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 84/5

⁶² Louis MacNeice, *Selected Poems*, Michael Longley (ed.), Faber and Faber Ltd., London, 1988, p. 21

⁶³ Augé 1995, p. 87

Its ankles wet, its grimace relaxed again.

This place, Ireland in his context, has relations, history and identity; “fuchsia hedges”, “whitewashed walls”, “serene sun” and “faces”. These faces, as opposed to the strangely disembodied faces in Larkin’s “The Building” and “Ambulances”, are qualified as ‘real’ faces in MacNeice: “not the permanent masks”. MacNeice sketches a lively community where “the farmer asks/Twenty per cent too much” and a girl “forgetting to be suave,/A tiro choosing stuffs, preferring mauve.” – a far cry from the static children and women in “Ambulance”. However, even this community, this anthropological place, is offset against the non-place of the train: “I would like to give you more but cannot hold/This stuff within my hands and the train goes on”. The train in MacNeice’s “Train to Dublin” is non-place to which “movement adds [...] solitude.”⁶⁴

Larkin’s “The Whitsun Weddings” similarly sets place against non-place emphasizing the traveller’s solitariness. The “fleeting images” of the train ride are brilliantly captured in the poem: “Wide farms went by, short-shadowed cattle, and/Canals with floatings of industrial froth;/A hothouse flashed uniquely” until “the next town, new and nondescript,/Approached”. Interestingly, the speaker’s perspective is slightly warped. Whereas the first stanza still assumes the movement of the train, “we ran/Behind the backs of houses”, the speaker in the second stanza seems to have given in to the more immediate presence of the train: instead of the train moving towards different places it now seems as if the different static objects are moving towards or past the apparently static train: “a farm went by”, “the next town [...] approached” much like the “telephone posts/Go striding backwards” in MacNeice’s poem. However, this shift of perspective does not seem to affect the speaker who calmly resorts to the traveller’s

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 87

solitary activity sketched in “Autobiography at an Air-Station” and “The Building” before: ignoring “whoops and skirls” he simply goes “on reading”, before he notices that what he “took for porters larking with the mails” (again, porters here serve merely as a station’s inventory like the kiosk girl in “Autobiography...”, like the porter in “Friday Night...” and the scruffy porters in “The Building”) are in fact colourful wedding parties.

The speaker is clearly identified with the first person singular pronoun in the first stanza (“I was late getting away”) so that the reader with “all cushions hot”, “the tall heat”, the train’s gently swerving movement and the speaker’s assertion that “all sense/Of being in a hurry [is] gone” is almost lulled into the peaceful idyll of non-descript train passengers as the speaker idly switches from the first person singular pronoun to the first person plural (“We ran/Behind the backs of houses”) in the course of the first stanza. The speaker lets himself become part of the similitude of the train’s non-place and pulls in the reader – a comfortable non-place that does not pose a threat as the train is “three-quarters-empty” anyway. Larkin picks up on this in “Dockery and Son” where his speaker wryly describes: “I catch my train, ignored.”

The speaker in his first person singular capacity only re-surfaces in the fourth stanza in “The Whitsun Weddings” where he is roused from his paper and leans “more promptly out” to see the wedding party “again in different terms”. Curiously, the description of the wedding parties in their “parodies of fashion” does not once in the third, fourth and fifth stanza make use of a personal pronoun. Instead, there are only nouns “fathers”, “mothers”, “uncle”, “perms”, “nylon gloves”, “banquet-halls” etc. marking off the wedding parties unreally from the speaker’s expected progress. When the first person plural pronoun “we” in “as we moved” re-surfaces in the fifth stanza, it takes on a different quality from the “we” that previously idly denoted unknown others

on the train. It is now more conscious of the others it embraces – the “fresh couples” boarding the train taking them on their honeymoons. Along with this goes an almost imperceptible shift in the attitude of the speaker. Where the day’s torrid atmosphere was idly relaxed in the first place during the train’s “slow and stopping curve southwards”, the boarding of the new couples with the chatter of their wedding parties and the approach of the big city seems to go hand in hand with a quickening of pace: “we hurried towards London, shuffling goutts of steam.” It remains delectably ambiguous whether it is the train that shuffles goutts of steam or whether it is the breathless chatter of the nervous brides.

Approaching London with its “building-plots” and “major roads” seems to result in a slight disarray of pronouns. The sixth stanza singles out the girls “gripping their handbags tighter” with a third person plural pronoun (“loaded with the sum they saw”) from the community of the train travellers only to take them in again with the first person plural in “we hurried towards London”. Then the third person plural pronoun denotes not only the girls but refers to the new couples (“they watched the landscape, sitting side by side”) which in turn isolates the speaker. He is simply not part of the wedding couples. The comfortable train ride with the non-place’s easily assumed similitude on the part of the speaker turns into an almost agitated negotiation of belonging and ultimately, solitude. The speaker returns to his own thoughts (“*I* thought of London spread out in the sun”) only to conclude two lines later: “there *we* were aimed” [emphasis mine] trying to reunite the passengers under the common pronoun but knowing just as well that all they have in common is “this frail/Travelling coincidence”. As soon as the speaker clarifies this, the pace of the train that had once more picked up earlier (“we raced across/Bright knots of rail”) slows down: “we slowed again”. The “bright knots of rail” can be seen as a confirmation of the new marriages – the couples

have just 'tied the knot' with its ring (not yet the "leaden" quality of "Birmingham magic all discredited" from Larkin's "Dry-Point") still bright and shiny and thus set against the solitude and "blackened moss" that enclose the speaker.

The slowness between "walls of blackened moss" is markedly different from the slowness of "the sunlit Saturday" in the first stanza. Accepted, almost cosy non-place turns into a non-place that marks out the frailness of a temporary community. The "sense of falling" in the second but last line may on the one hand describe the passengers' literal sensation when they have already vacated their seats and the "tightened brakes [take] hold" but also hints at the vague disappointment on the part of the speaker as the temporary community falls apart. This is why the speaker himself and the first person plural pronoun are notably absent from the last three lines of "The Whitsun Weddings". Assured solitude in similitude was broken by a frail imagined community and is in turn broken by this community's rupture. The speaker in his individual identity disappears.

In the context of non-place "The Whitsun Weddings" is the first of the poems discussed so far that at least temporarily acknowledges the positivity of the non-place. The place that only knows similitude and solitude can be a relief getting away from the community's (any community's) individual history and relations. The speaker in "The Whitsun Weddings" almost confirms this when he says the he "was late getting away". The way he buries himself in his reading material until the insistent "whoops and skirls" pull him out of his chosen non-place underlines this view. It is only when he is directly confronted with the crowd of "a dozen marriages" that there is a sudden urge to identify. In the way that the light falters throughout the poem ("sunlit Saturday", "tall heat", "short-shadowed cattle", "sun destroys", "poplars cast/Long shadows", "walls of blackened moss", "rain") the speaker's self-contained anonymity becomes emptiness.

As the crowd with its fleeting possibility of identification turns away, the speaker is literally left to his own devices.

It needs to be emphasized, however, that Augé's non-place is free of any kind of evaluation; non-place merely tends to turn sinister and negative in Larkin's poetry. Non-place in Augé's sense merely denotes the (temporary) absence of an individual identity which is not a bad thing *per se*. Indeed, the end of Larkin's "Here" hints at the positivity of a place without relations, history and identity.

Taking the opposite train route from the one in "The Whitsun Weddings" the train in "Here" swerves from "rich industrial shadows" through fields "to the surprise of a large town". While the journey in "The Whitsun Weddings" presumably starts in the "tall heat" of the afternoon and moves from light to dusk, the journey in "Here" starts at night, passes "dawn" and ends "facing the sun" and thus literally elucidates the poem's final images. There is no identified speaker in "Here" and accordingly, the train journey itself is only made up of fleeting images – "skies and scarecrows, haystacks, hares and pheasants" – that paradoxically do not stop once the train journey is over. The fleeting images remain: "grain-scattered streets", "barge-crowded water", "residents from raw estates". There is a community, but even that is only noted in passing: "A cut-price crowd, urban yet simple". The speaker does not try to make contact with the crowd so his identified presence within the poem – as would be clarified by personal pronouns – is simply not necessary. The speaker makes conscious use of the similitude and solitude of the non-place and ducks behind the bustle of the city. This is why "solitude" explicitly appears in the first stanza and "loneliness" kicks off the last stanza. These expressions literally bracket the busyness of the urban crowd and offer the speaker a retreat beyond.

"Here" also makes use of the 'door'-topos that we have previously noted. The urban

crowd in the poem almost aggressively “push[es] through plate-glass swing doors to their desires”. When the room behind the viciously locked door in “Best Society” offers genial solitude and the achievement of individual identity then the clear plate-glass swing doors in “Here” make a perverse show of the crowd’s desires. The crowd will not find individual identity or meaning behind “cheap suits, red kitchen-ware, sharp shoes” or “iced lollies”. This is why the speaker deliberately turns potential place (a crowd with relations and a place with history as indicated by “domes and statues, spires and cranes”, “the slave museum” and “consulates”) into non-place by quickly passing through without making human contact or lingering on details. The entire poem is one great enumeration in long sentences that only shorten at the conclusion. The almost absent (on more than one level) speaker is looking for “unfenced existence:/Facing the sun, untalkative, out of reach.” These few words sum up beautifully what Augé is driving at when he speaks of non-place as “space than cannot be defined as relational or historical or concerned with identity”. Indeed, Augé explains the phenomenon witnessed in “Here”:

It is not surprising that it is among solitary ‘travellers’ of the last century - not professional travellers or scientists, but travellers on impulse or for unexpected reasons – that we are most likely to find prophetic evocations of space in which neither identity, not relations, nor history make any sense; spaces in which solitude is experienced as an overburdening or emptying of individuality.⁶⁵

It is also no surprise, then, when the speaker of one of Larkin’s most famous ‘train’-poems, “I Remember, I Remember”, almost gleefully turns anthropological place into non-place. The pronouns in this poem are considerably less complicated than in the previously discussed poems. Despite being on a train “coming up England by a different line”, the speaker can casually employ the first person plural pronoun in “we stopped” and just as easily resort to the first person singular plural in the course of the first

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 87

stanza: ““Why, Coventry!’ I exclaimed. ‘I was born here.’” Indeed, the first person singular appears 18 times (including the title) in the poem’s seven stanzas; the possessive pronoun “my” appears five times and the pronoun “mine” once. Here for once do we have a speaker who is cheerfully himself.

The use of direct speech underlines the speaker’s cheerful assertiveness – a far cry from the lack of communication in “The Whitsun Weddings” or the quick prayer “*poor soul*” in “Ambulances”. Instead of leaning out promptly at a nondescript station as the speaker in “The Whitsun Weddings”, the speaker in “I Remember, I Remember” is consciously looking “for a sign/That this was still the town that had been ‘mine’”, but is interrupted when the train starts moving again. The speaker in “The Whitsun Weddings” might suddenly be eager to see things, the speaker in this poem, however, seems to shrug and get on: “I sat back, staring at my boots.” The poem turns into a dialogue as the speaker’s “friend” is introduced in direct speech. Given the difficulty of the speakers in the other poems discussed so far with the concept of friendship (“my pal” in “Naturally...” and the timidly abstract “make friends” and “friendship” in “Autobiography...”) it is almost a relief to have a speaker casually speak of a “friend”. This is why the train journey in “I Remember, I Remember” disqualifies as non-place. The speaker and his friend form a casual small community in which the other’s individual identity is just as casually acknowledged. However, asked for his roots, the speaker happily parodies anthropological place. The place just witnessed is, to borrow from “Church-Going”, “not worth stopping for”, because all the childhood memories with “boys all biceps and the girls all chest” are exaggeratedly made up to deny all kinds of relations with this place. If the place offers neither relations, nor history, nor identity, then it turns into non-place. By making up parodies of childhood memories the speaker effectively turns natural anthropological place into personal non-place,

effectively doing what the speaker's fellow traveller suspects: "You look as if you wished the place in Hell". The laconic reply "I suppose it's not the place's fault" and the concluding "Nothing, like something, happens anywhere" once more denies the place its status as place. Reading "I Remember, I Remember" in the context of non-place is so refreshing because for once the poem's speaker brilliantly asserts his individuality. He can do so because he is an active part within a small community (made up of the speaker and his friend) and does not timidly have to negotiate becoming part of an already existing, alien community. It is through fierce individuality that the speaker can forgo the existence of a past community – just because he is rooted in a new one.

It is thus through the discussion of place and non-place that Larkin actively negotiates rootedness on the one hand and the universality of poetry on the other hand. We have seen once more that the relation between culture/community and individual is reciprocal. An unrooted individual cannot possibly exist as he or she lacks the parameters to define its individual identity. The above analysis of individual poems allows the assumption that Larkin's poems possess a universal level through his intense concentration on the recognizable and the non-exclusive in the larger humanity. Non-place in this context functions on more than one level. 'Designated' non-places like airports, hotels or train stations are universally recognizable in their empty anonymity and purpose. Larkin redeems these non-places by introducing consoling human details like the "wasteful, weak, propitiatory flowers" in "The Building". If there is no consolation and only amorphous solitude as in "Friday Night in the Royal Station Hotel" or "The Whitsun Weddings" it is exactly these intense human emotions that remain universally recognizable, are abstracted from narrow concepts of place and thus abstain from notions of exclusive cultural identity.

Furthermore, the linguistic notion of “non-place” as the negative of “place” seems to correspond to Larkin’s predilection for double-negatives that refuse to become pure positives. We have seen in “Talking in Bed” how “incomplete unrest”, “not untrue” and “not unkind” within the poem will not automatically turn into “complete rest”, “true” and “kind” in the same way that “non-place” does not automatically denote the absence of a somewhere. Non-place is merely elsewhere. Booth notes how the cumulation of adjectives with the negative prefix ‘un’ creates “a tone of diffidence or irony, though they often have positive implications”⁶⁶; Augé’s non-place works along the same lines.

Vincent Descombes meditates:

Where is the character at home? The question bears less on a geographical territory than a rhetorical territory [...]. The character is at home when he is at ease in the rhetoric of the people with whom he shares life. The sign of being at home is the ability to make oneself understood without too much difficulty, and to follow the reasoning of others without any need for long explanations. The rhetorical country of a character ends where his interlocutors no longer understand the reason he gives for his deeds and actions, the criticisms he makes or the enthusiasms he displays. A disturbance of rhetorical communication marks the crossing of a frontier, which should of course be envisaged as a border zone, a marshland, rather than a clearly drawn line.⁶⁷

It seems as if Larkin has found a way to impolder these marshlands, as they “no longer open up on to totally foreign worlds”.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Booth 2005, p. 8

⁶⁷ Quoted in: Augé 1995, p. 108

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 109

Chapter 2

'And that will be England gone': Larkin's Pastoral

The analyses in the previous chapter seem to confirm the universality which Larkin hopes for in his work. He does indeed elicit the same response in readers when and wherever they read him. However, at other times Larkin seems to see himself in altogether more 'safe' provincial terms. With characteristic provocativeness he states that "poets write for people with the same background and the same experience as themselves, which might be taken as a compelling argument in support of provincialism."⁶⁹ Indeed, the pastoral in "Going, Going" and "Bridge for the Living" can be seen as provincial. When Larkin mourns the loss of the "fields and farms" and "the meadows, the lanes" in "Going, Going", elaborates on the "wind-muscled wheatfields" and the "[t]all church-towers" of "Howden and Beverley, Hedon and Patrington" in "Bridge for the Living" and praises Elgar's music that makes him "think of the Midlands, the South-West Midlands, the meadows, the rivers, the occasional church and cathedral"⁷⁰ as the perfect cure for homesickness for England in the broadcast *Desert Island Discs*, he is fully in tune with what George Orwell ("solid breakfasts and gloomy Sundays, smoky towns and winding roads, green fields and red pillar-boxes"), T.S. Eliot ("19th century Gothic churches and the music of Elgar") or John Betjeman ("oil-lit churches", "the noise of mowing machines on Saturday

⁶⁹ *RW*, p. 69

⁷⁰ *FR*, p. 109

afternoons”) associate with English national culture.⁷¹

“Going, Going” is one of the few poems in Larkin’s *oeuvre* that explicitly mourn the loss of a provincial, rural England: “that will be England gone”, setting a pastoral landscape of “fields and farms”, “The shadows, the meadows, the lanes,/The guildhalls, the carved choirs” against “bleak high-risers”, the “M1”, “concrete and tyres”. The regular rhyme scheme in the poem’s nine stanzas, abcabc, suggests a kind of unstoppable progress that is only once broken by an unfinished sentence in stanza six “You try to get near the sea/In summer...” as an expression of nostalgia.

Whereas the use of pronouns in the poems discussed in the previous chapter is very consistent, in “Going, Going” they point to a struggle with a feeling of isolation on the one hand (“The crowd/Is young in the M1 café;/Their kids are screaming for more” [emphasis mine]) and the perception of a certain community in the ironic first person plural use of “We can always escape in the car” and the sincere “Things are tougher than we are” and “but all that remains/For us will be concrete and tyres” on the other hand. Strikingly and most unusually for Larkin, “Going, Going” makes use of a large number of first person singular pronouns most of which are connected to a verb of emotional perception “I thought”, “I knew”, “I feel” (which appears twice), “I just think” rendering the poem uncharacteristically explicit in its introspection. The first person singular pronoun that stands out in “I snuff it” is equally uncharacteristically explicit for a poet who finds myriads of subtle metaphors for approaching death.

The voicing of the nation’s sentiments on the one hand (“that will be England gone”) clashes against the isolation and dread of a single speaker (“Their kids”) which occasionally falls onto the irritatedly oppositional second person singular in “Chuck filth in the sea, if you must”. The speaker, as it were, steps back from the scene,

⁷¹ Quoted in: Krishan Kumar, *The Making of English National Identity*, Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp.228/9

aligning himself with “the old part” against those who “are screaming for more -/More houses, more parking allowed,/More caravan sites, more pay”. The alert reader will note, however, that the speaker himself is out and about on the M1, taking a break at the café, too.

There is a genuine sense of loss and dread of the “bricked in” future in “Going, Going”, but the speaker seems unsure whether really to count himself as part of the English community. Strikingly, the features that illustrate the pastoral side of an England that is slowly disappearing remain static and impersonal. “The shadows, the meadows, the lanes/The guildhalls, the carved choirs” seem to be taken from a tourist guide to rural England “to trigger a predictable response”⁷² and do not seem to spring from a personal, intimate idea of England. Larkin’s bicycle-clipped speaker in “Church Going” appears much more genuine when he contemplates “some brass and stuff/Up at the holy end” in a church that probably has a carved choir, too.

“Bridge for the Living” works similarly but with more attention to detail. As pastoral, the poem contrasts city with landscape – or “Scenery” to use Larkin’s own word. The “domes and cranes”, “warves and wires, ricks and refineries” of the city – Hull – give way to a “three-cornered hinterland” peopled with “plain gulls”, “sharp fox” and “brilliant pheasant”. Cunningly, the “domes and cranes” bring to mind the “[s]hips, towers, domes” of Wordsworth’s “Composed Upon Westminster Bridge”, thus emphasizing the title of the poem and bringing home the significance of the bridge as connecting element. “Isolate city” at the very beginning of the poem corresponds to Eliot’s “[u]nreal city” in *The Waste Land* in which “A crowd flowed over London Bridge” but whereas Eliot’s London Bridge disappears under a faceless crowd, Larkin’s bridge “make[s] union manifest”.⁷³ The present reality of the bridge even radiates into

⁷² Andrew Swarbrick, *Out of Reach The Poetry of Philip Larkin*, Macmillan Press Ltd., Houndmills, Basingstoke, 1995, p.142

the past, so that “lost centuries of local lives [...] reassemble and unclose”.

The mere “lanes” in “Going, Going” are elaborated into “[l]ong white-flowered lanes” in “Bridge for the Living” and thus touch at a topos of Larkin’s. Betjeman in “In Westminster Abbey” enumerates “what our Nation stands for,/Books from Boots and country lanes”.⁷⁴ Lanes in Larkin’s *oeuvre* seem to connote not only the English “Scenery”, but also a certain idea of unattainable freedom. The “[l]ost lanes of Queen Anne’s lace” in “Cut Grass”, the “flowered lanes that twist” in “The View” and maybe even the “nut-strewn roads” in “Poetry of Departures” almost literally correspond to roads not taken. The bridge in “Bridge for the Living”, however, is a connection not only between two landmasses but between people; the expression of a new community.

The personified “[t]all church-towers” of “Howden and Beverley, Hedon and Patrington” make the “Bridge for the Living” specifically the Humber Bridge and geographically locate the “isolate city”. With the poem’s stillness, softness and harmony (“wheatfields wash round villages”, “soft huge haze”, “snow-thickened winter days are yet more still”, “farms fold in fields”, “harbour of the heart” – note the frequent alliterations) the first part of “Bridge for the Living” appears as a respectful pastiche of “Here”, but with an altogether different outcome. “Bridge for the Living” offers a “harbour for the heart”, a safe haven for the soul; “Here” offers exactly the opposite: “unfenced existence”, the soul’s absolute freedom.

Whereas “Here” works all the more intensely because it abstains from using personal pronouns, the second part of “Bridge for the Living” evokes a strong community of “local lives” through its repeated use of the first person plural pronoun “we” and the corresponding possessive pronoun (“our solitude”, “our dear landscape”, “our lives”,

⁷³ John Osborne in *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence* detects *The Waste Land* as a subtext in Larkin’s “The Whitsun Weddings”; *The Waste Land* itself being a version of pastoral. John Osborne, *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence A Case of Wrongful Conviction*, Palgrave Macmillan, Houndmills, Basingstoke, 2008, pp. 60-63

⁷⁴ John Betjeman, *Collected Poems*, John Murray, London, 2006, p. 74

“we may give”, “we are”, “we live”). Where the “unfenced existence” of “Here” is “out of reach”, the bridge in “Bridge for the Living” is “[r]eaching for the world, as our lives do,/As all lives do”.

Seamus Heaney’s Larkin whose England is “dearly beloved”⁷⁵ suddenly seems to become more plausible in this context. “Bridge for the Living” celebrates the end of “separate shire” with its provincial diction and speaks almost tenderly of “our dear landscape”. The celebratory tone of “north and south make union manifest” would not be out of place in a Victorian political manifesto. The celebratory tone might seem over the top to an outsider, but also marks out the speaker as one of those directly concerned with the advantages of the newly built bridge.

Indeed, “Bridge for the Living” seems to be one of the very few of Larkin’s poems whose speaker is actively part of a community. As opposed to the poems discussed so far, there is no isolated individual facing an indifferent “they”, but after the clear-cut pastoral of the first part of the poem, there is only one personal pronoun: “we”.

The community sketched in “Bridge for the Living” is not the gaggle of faceless, slightly threatening others of, say, “The View”, nor the clearly identified young crowd in “Going, Going”, but a specific community at a particular time and place. Whereas “Going, Going” is provincial in a sense that could just about – with a bit of effort – be translated to other cultural communities, “Bridge for the Living” shows Larkin at his most unambiguously provincial. Is it the fact that both poems were commissioned poems that makes Larkin resort to narrowly provincial terms?

In Patrick Kavanagh’s distinction “Provincial worries what others think/Parochial doesn’t care” the provincial is “always looking over his shoulder for metropolitan

⁷⁵ Seamus Heaney, “Englands of the Mind”, in: Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978*, Faber And Faber Limited. London, 1980, p. 167

approval” while the parochial is “secure in its sense of self-worth and importance”.⁷⁶ “Bridge for the Living”, for all its intense localism and “Going, Going” with its nostalgia for a disappearing England of fields, farms and village louts, only seem to be provincial in Kavanagh’s sense. Instead of self-consciously doubting “the social and artistic validity of his parish”⁷⁷ they merely seem to huddle around the innermost circles in the Stoics’ identity circles without looking over their shoulders at all. Larkin’s provincialism seems to be neither self-consciously narrow-minded nor overly self-assured, but an altogether different version than anticipated by Kavanagh. If Larkin’s non-place in its universal particularity comes at the Stoics’ concentric circles from the outside and touches on common humanity first, then Larkin’s version of provincialism perhaps entails sculpting the province in its particular universality as the smallest recognizable fragment within the circles of cultural identity. Larkin’s treatment of the pastoral tradition sheds some light on his version of provincialism.

The *Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* connects the idea of pastoral with nostalgia. Pastoral “is [...] a form of primitivism and a potent longing for things past”. The pastoral’s “form of primitivism”⁷⁸ seems to go hand in hand with Larkin’s provincialism. Perhaps Larkin’s version of pastoral expresses a kind of unrooted, universal provincialism.

While pastoral “seems a fairly accessible literary concept [...] it sometimes seems as if there are as many versions of pastoral as there are critics who write about it.”⁷⁹ Indeed, “the multiplicity of forms assumed by the pastoral impulsive [...] was already characteristic at an early date and may be thought essential to its nature.”⁸⁰ It is clear that the intimate English pastoral of, say, John Constable became unavailable after

⁷⁶ John Goodby, *Irish Poetry since 1950: from Stillness into History*, Manchester University Press, 2000, p. 35

⁷⁷ Quoted in: Alex Davis, “Irish Poetry to 1966” in: *A Companion to Twentieth Century Poetry*, Neil Roberts (ed.), Blackwell Publishers Ltd., Oxford, 2001, p. 352

⁷⁸ J.A. Cuddon, *Dictionary of Literary Terms & Literary Theory*, Penguin, London, 1999, p.647

industrialisation so that Christopher Ricks's assertion that Larkin's pastoral is only ever "a version of the pastoral"⁸¹ is hardly as deprecatory as intended.

According to David Gervais, nostalgia, the key emotion of pastoral, "likes to pretend that the past is really there just to feed itself. It makes it into a repository for feelings it is unable to indulge in the present, projecting them onto it until they mask what it really was."⁸² Gervais states that in Larkin's poetry "what is no longer there feels more vivid than anything that is present." Thus, Larkin's "true England is on the brink of being a 'version of pastoral' from the word go", simply because Larkin in his search for "an authentic native tradition" looks back to Edward Thomas, A.E. Housman and Hardy. The further back Larkin goes, "the further he gets from any England of which he himself had any direct experience."⁸³ The disconnected past becomes a pre-industrial Arcadia; a pastoral hide-out for Larkin from the England of his immediate present.

Another look at "Going, Going" confirms this point. According to Gervais, the poem expresses "a wistful desire to see Britain 'great'".⁸⁴ In "Going, Going" there is a pronounced nostalgia in the regretful observation that "beyond the town,/There would always be fields and farms,/Where the village louts could climb/Such trees as were not cut down". Change is very tangibly in the air, "the old part retreats" and not much of the old, pastoral England with its "meadows" and "lanes", "guildhalls" and "carved choirs" is preserved. The speaker is at a loss as he observes the rapid change around him "It seems, just now,/To be happening so very fast" and "For the first time I feel somehow/That it isn't going to last". England turns into the "First slum of Europe" with

⁷⁹ Paul Alpers, "What is Pastoral?" in: *Critical Enquiry*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (Spring, 1982), p. 427

⁸⁰ David M. Halperin, *Before Pastoral: Theocritus and the Ancient Tradition of Bucolic Poetry*, Yale University Press, 1983, p. 29

⁸¹ Quoted in: David Gervais, *Literary Englands: Versions of 'Englishness' in Modern Writing*, Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 185

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 223

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 1993, p. 191

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 1993, p. 214

“garbage [...] too thick-strewn/To be swept up now”. The poet’s dystopian vision of the present is countered by his vision of the past, evoking English tradition and landscape as powerless against new environmental, economic and social developments. The very title of the poem with its repetition “Going, Going” simultaneously suggests an England disappearing into the past and an England uncontrollably and unstopably moving into the future. The movement pulls in both directions leaving the speaker unhappily stranded in a rapidly deteriorating present. There is no constant in the present; it either turns back to the past or gives in to the future. This, however, challenges Gervais’s view. Where he would like to cast the speaker in “Going, Going” as disconnected from an immediate experience hankering after the “fields and farms” of England’s past, he fails to see that the speaker’s thoughts “For the first time I feel somehow/That it isn’t going to last” point at a pronounced nostalgia for the present which he sees endangered by the future. In comparison, A.E. Housman’s “Into my heart an air that kills...” - which Larkin included in his *Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse* - with its articulate nostalgia for “The happy highways where I went/And cannot come again”⁸⁵ is clearly a nostalgia for the past’s fulfilled happiness.

As we have seen “Bridge for the Living” conjures up a modern Arcadian idyll that incorporates both city and country. The seasons of traditional pastoral are even expanded in the poem: “Snow-thickened winter days are yet more still” and “ice-crustrated ships/like errant birds carry her loneliness”. In the overall harmony of the poem in which the “white towers” seem to echo Gerard Manley Hopkins’s pastoral Oxford (“Towery city and branchy between towers”) in “Duns Scotus’s Oxford”⁸⁶, Larkin casts the Humber Bridge as an agent for classical nostalgia instead of exposing the threat of

⁸⁵ A.E. Housman, *The Collected Poems of A.E. Housman*, Wordsworth Editions Ltd., Ware, Hertfordshire, 2005, p. 55

⁸⁶ Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, W.H. Gardner and N.H. MacKenzie (eds.), Oxford University Press, 1967, p. 79

the Industrial Age. In “Bridge for the Living”, pastoral landscape and modern architecture combine not to show the way into the golden past or future, but to connect present, past and future. There is no sense of retreat, no sense of closure. The closed space Arcadia is effectively opened and widened. The idea of a truly pastoral retreat independent of unsatisfactory time and age disappears.

Frederick Garber underlines that what he terms as the “pastoral space” “works with all sorts of gaps that can never be bridged”.⁸⁷ This not only once more marks out the remote and constructed nature of pastoral on the one hand, but whereas pastoral poetry attempts to smooth over and lose these gaps in idealization, Larkin is never in dire need to bridge gaps between past, present and future in the first place. Larkin’s places and non-places are all very much here and very much now. However, Larkin’s speakers again and again betray a Neoplatonic longing for transcendence. This, however, marks out the tragedy in Larkin’s poetry: his Larkinesque ‘pastoral space’ of transcendence remains tragically out of reach. There is no absolution.

Discussing pastoral, Terry Gifford underlines from the beginning that the concept Arcadia has always been an illusion.

To refer to ‘pastoral’ up to about 1610 was to refer to poems or dramas of a specific formal type in which *supposed* shepherds spoke to each other, usually in pentameter verse, about their work and their loves, with (mostly) *idealised* descriptions of their countryside.⁸⁸ [italics mine]

Theocritus might have found his inspiration in the very real Sicilian landscape, the characters of his shepherds, however, were a mere construct: they were *supposed* shepherds. Even Alexander Pope in his “Discourse on Pastoral Poetry” emphasizes “that true pastoral had to be as untrue as possible, since it should be concerned with the

⁸⁷ Cuddon 1999, p. 17

⁸⁸ Terry Gifford, *Pastoral*, Routledge, Abingdon, 1999, p. 1

ideal rather than the actual”.⁸⁹ Larkin’s version of pastoral seems to turn this phrase around. Returning to “Going, Going” and “Bridge for the Living”, these two poems with their non-existent Arcadias seem to be concerned rather with the actual than with the ideal despite borrowing from the treasure trove of pastoral terminology. Larkin’s speakers are acutely of the present. Similarly, the “warm yellow sand” in Larkin’s “To the Sea”, “the recent buds” that “relax and spread” in “The Trees” and the “white lilac” in “Cut Grass” are reminiscent of pastoral landscape, but in Larkin these instances either refer to the actual – as the sand in “To the Sea”- or point to a metaphysical *beyond* as in “Cut Grass” where death sneaks into “the white hours/Of young-leafed June”. Pastoral settings in Larkin are somewhat less-deceived than their sentimental counterparts.

Larkin’s version of pastoral dispenses with the love-making, singing shepherd, but superficially seems to stick with the convention of contrast “between the little world of natural simplicity and the great world of civilization, power, statecraft, ordered society, established codes of behaviour, and artifice in general.”⁹⁰ In “The Whitsun Weddings” the speaker witnesses how “fields” turn into “building-plots, and poplars cast/Long shadows over major roads”. The rural makes way for the urban.

In this context it should also be noted that the movement in “Here” is the direct opposite of the movement in the pastoral of “Going, Going”. In “Here”, the pastoral imagery of “haystacks, hares and pheasants” at the beginning of the poem and “fast-shadowed wheat-fields” towards the end of the poem are interrupted by the peopled urban imagery of the “cut-price crowd” only to open out into a wishful unfenced existence that is not necessarily fixed in place and time. Leaving “rich industrial shadows” and “traffic” behind, the speaker is fully aware of the fact that the “thin and

⁸⁹ Quoted in: Roger Sales, *English Literature in History: 1780-1830 Pastoral and Politics*, Hutchinson, London, 1983, p. 19

⁹⁰ Halperin 1983, pp. 70/71

thistled” fields do not qualify for the pastoral quality of full green “meadows”. Nonetheless, it is this landscape – a deficient Arcadia – that finally opens up towards “unfenced existence”. In “Going, Going” “fields and farms” give way to the “M1 café” and the “first slum of Europe” and then swerve back into an irretrievable past. “Here” as pastoral thus differs profoundly from “Going, Going” as pastoral. What makes these poems not pastoral in the original sense (the contrast between country and city) is not what the poems are about. The pastoral contrast of the rural and urban merely serves as a metaphor for the speaker’s thoughts and is far removed from any “nostalgia for the good old days.”⁹¹ In this context one should perhaps also note that Larkin’s speakers hardly ever actively engage with beautiful nature: the speaker in “Poetry of Departures” only fantasizes about “swagger[ing] the nut-strewn roads”; the speaker in “The Whitsun Weddings” firmly remains in his train compartment, Mr Bleaney’s successor merely looks out onto a “tussocky, littered” landscape, the cyclist in “Church Going” exchanges landscape for “sprawlings of flowers, cut/For Sunday, brownish now”. Little do Larkin’s speakers have in common with Heaney’s speaker in “Digging” who looks back on a long ancestral line of men engaging with the Irish soil or Betjeman’s sentimentally nostalgic speaker following the twisted “footpath” through “meadowlands”, and “enormous cornfields” in “Middlesex”.⁹² In Larkin’s mature poetry, it is only the speaker in “Here” who really seems to be in the great outdoors away from signs of civilization, standing on the beach, “facing the sun”.

According to David Halperin, a literary work becomes pastoral as soon as it contrasts the simplicity of nature with the complication of civilisation and as soon as it contrasts a bleak, incomprehensible reality with visions of artistic harmony. That this last point in Halperin’s pastoral approach might be a little too all-encompassing is underlined by

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 15

⁹² Betjeman 2006, p. 163

Empson in his musings on pastoral: “It is clear at any one rate that th[e] grand notion of the inadequacy of life [...] needs to be counted as a possible territory of pastoral” that is completed by Empson’s observation that the inadequacy of life he talks about is “so reliable a bass note in the arts”.⁹³ The inadequacy of life can full well be expressed in ways profoundly differing from the pastoral. Empson’s wry observation that “in pastoral you take a limited life and pretend it is the full and normal one, and a suggestion that one must do this with all life”⁹⁴ rings decidedly untrue for Larkin. Larkin’s speakers know everything there is to know about the inadequacy of life, but they make no attempt to pass off this inadequate life as “the full and normal one”. Instead of delving headfirst into an allegedly safe nostalgia Larkin’s speakers contemplate their inadequacy with painful frankness. A solution to this inadequacy is sometimes foreshadowed, but remains consistently unavailable. It is here that sentimental nostalgia is replaced by what might be termed tragic neoplatonism. Furthermore, as we have seen in the previous chapter, Larkin’s speakers are rather pre-occupied with the “complication of civilization” negotiating their place (or non-place, for that matter) within various imagined communities that there is little room for musings on “artistic harmony” within the poetry.

According to Gifford, “[i]t is essential to pastoral that the reader is conscious of this construct so that she or he can see what the writer is doing with the device.”⁹⁵ Larkin deliberately employs pastoral images and attitudes and almost imperceptibly shifts emphases in order to evade the sentimental version of pastoral. “Bridge for the Living” and “Going, Going”, as we have seen, appear as superficially pastoral, but nevertheless refuse to set up a classical Arcadia. Larkin’s nostalgias are set in the present.

⁹³ Quoted in: Halperin 1983, p. 55

⁹⁴ William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral*, New Directions, New York, 1974, p. 115

⁹⁵ Gifford 1999, p. 22

Coming closest to the nostalgic “potent longing for the past” is probably Larkin’s “To The Sea”, the first poem in *High Windows*, in which the speaker suffers a sudden recollection of childhood as he steps onto a summer beach. Noticeably, the speaker has “to step over the low wall” once more indicating Larkin’s speaker’s hesitance to become part of an imagined community – the “miniature gaiety of seashores”. On the other hand, however, what speaks for a potent longing for the past is that the seaside scene “brings sharply back something known long before” to the speaker who apparently revels in happy childhood recollections. Even though “everything crowds under the low horizon”, Larkin’s use of the bright primary colours of “blue water”, “red bathing caps” and “yellow sand” along with the positively connotated adjectives “fresh” and “warm” certainly leave an impression of past happiness. The pastness of the speaker’s experiences is not explicit, especially when the speaker in the second stanza states that everything is “still going on, all of it, still going on”. This echoes Betjeman’s “Beside the Seaside” with the similar repetition “still the same, the same/As it was last year and the year before” whose humorous “England leaves/Her centre for the tide-line”⁹⁶ is considerably more specific in its national location than Larkin’s “low horizon”. This is a version of “England gone” and evokes full-blown sentimental nostalgia for times irrevocably past. In Larkin, the past seems like an underlying current to his immediate present and thus does not hold particular importance except as a recollection rendering the present more vivid and immediate.

Pure recollections are clearly marked as such by a temporal adverb and the use of the past tense

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.

⁹⁶ Betjeman 2006, pp. 128ff

These memories are aborted by a sudden break: “Strange to it now, I watch the cloudless scene” in which the speaker returns to the present to remain there for the rest of the poem. But after a very short identification with the scene (“The *same* clear water over smoothed pebbles” [emphasis mine]) it becomes clear that the speaker is not part of the scene he observes. Childhood memories do not help him to identify with those who “lie, eat, sleep in the hearing of the surf”. This is underlined by the shift of personal pronouns in the last two stanzas that pays homage to the brief identification but then emphasizes once more that the speaker does not belong. From “I watch” in the third stanza the personal pronouns turn to “our falling short” in the fourth stanza (indicating the very short sense of identification and belonging) to end up with “their children” and “as they ought”. The speaker has no interest in returning to the past. There is nothing indicating a potent longing to return to the blissful state of childhood. Instead, Larkin’s speaker uses memories of the past to make observations about the present so that the beach goers’ left “cheap cigars/The chocolate papers, tea-leaves” and “rusting soup cans” stand out more starkly than the *present-cum-past* memory of “blue water, towels, red bathing caps” and “the warm yellow sand” which come across too clichéd as to ring of personal nostalgia. The speaker emphasizes his lack of identification and fashions himself as an outsider to the families and scenes observed. The fact that he has his very own memories of a very similar past but nonetheless does not join the general seaside elation speaks against any nostalgic approach. If he had a potent longing for the past and if he wanted to try to recreate his childhood memories the speaker would whip out his towel and try to blend in with life on the beach. He does not. There is no longing for the past, merely a disinterested acknowledgement of the fact that the speaker was once part of the crowd, too. This is how Larkin creates an apparent seaside pastoral with its pseudo-nostalgia just to say that his speaker does not have any part in it whatsoever.

Something quite similar occurs in Larkin's "Annus Mirabilis" in which the speaker - much like the speaker in "Going, Going" - suffers a curiously reversed nostalgia that is not a potent longing for the past but a potent longing for the present. Even though the poem mentions a particular year, "sexual intercourse began/In nineteen sixty-three" which along with the historic landmarks of "Between the end of the *Chatterley* ban/And the Beatles' first LP" is history in Augé's sense; "history as a series of events recognized as events by large numbers of people".⁹⁷ While Augé enumerates "the Beatles" and "'68" as "shared events" of general - not necessarily individual - importance, the poem manages to capture an individual feeling of disconnectedness and yearning.

Larkin's speaker in "Annus Mirabilis" notes wryly - the wryness of it supported by the parentheses, as if as an afterthought - that the sexual liberation happened "rather late for me". His view is entirely unsentimental when he observes that

Up till then, there'd only been
A sort of bargaining,
A wrangle for a ring,
A shame that started at sixteen
And spread to everything.

Far from glorifying the past, the speaker notes the uptight notions of relationships of the late 50s, with the anaphora ("A sort of.../A wrangle.../A shame") emphasizing their restrictive nature. The speaker longs to be part of the new generation and regrets being part of the generation who missed the spirit of the liberating 60s. In the next stanza, however, it becomes clear that the speaker is looking at the merits of the (sexual) revolution with the same wry attitude that the inclusion of the brackets in the first stanza already suggests. Exaggerating how "Everyone felt the same,/And every life became/A brilliant breaking of the bank,/A quite unlosable game." and thus showing that the

⁹⁷ Augé 1995, p. 27

apparent reverse nostalgia shown while looking at the younger generation is nothing but contempt in the face of their unbounded enthusiasm. Sticking to the anaphora already exhibited in the second stanza, Larkin manages brilliantly to convey that nothing has changed for his speaker. Try as he might, partly due to his wry sarcasm, he cannot be part of the new generation. Any kind of longing is harshly eradicated by the speaker's awareness that such liberation is not available to him. In that way, his conclusion "So life was never better than/In nineteen sixty-three" celebrates a glorious past in which he did not participate. Another pair of parentheses once more underlines that the speaker has equally no part in the new generation: "(Though just too late for me)". The fact that the entire poem is framed by the repetition of "Between the end of the *Chatterley* ban/And the Beatles' first LP" emphasizes by its very structure how the speaker cannot escape his own mindset simply because he was born a little too early. Again, even though the poem offers some sort of nostalgia on the surface, there is nothing left of the idea once one digs a little deeper. "Annus Mirabilis" is thus also a version of pastoral exemplifying Larkin's speakers' pronounced longing for the present. Once more Larkin touches on pastoral nostalgia but remains completely unsentimental.

Larkin's speakers might reflect on a past, but if they do they do so in a decidedly un-nostalgic way, constantly aware of the fact that it cannot possibly be recreated in any way. In "Sad Steps" the speaker knows all too well that his youth "can't come again/But is for others undiminished somewhere", whereas in "Lines On A Young Lady's Photograph Album" there is no connection to the past as "a past that no one now can share,/No matter whose your future". In "If, My Darling" "the past is past". And would an escape into the peaceful pastoral world of literature not come in handy when the speaker in "A Study Of Reading Habits" complains that the protagonists of books "Seem far too familiar"? Instead of delving into the whole cosmos of happy rural

literature as an escape, the speaker simply does not “read much now”.

Larkin's overwhelming preoccupation is with the present. He has an abject horror at being trapped in the past like “The Old Fools” who exist “Not here and now, but where all happened once” and an equally abject fear of the future – “The sure extinction that we travel to” in “Aubade”. As he says in “If, My Darling”: “the future [is] neuter”. There is no room for Larkin's speakers, neither in the past, nor in the future, to accommodate visions of Arcadia; all that is available to them is reality's “incessant recital”, or (more beautifully) “the million-petalled flower of being here”. In “Lines On A Young Lady's Photograph Album” the past sticks out as a very clear picture of “a real girl in a real place”, but is not hazed over with a golden sheen. This is also true for Larkin's poem “MCMXIV” which with its repeated lament “Never such innocence again”, its “place-names all hazed over/With flowering grasses” and “wheat's restless silence” seems to combine pastoral elements to exactly the kind of nostalgia that sentimental pastoral requires. The Roman numerals Larkin uses for the title already point in the direction of a by-gone age; “Larkin cherishes no naïve longing for an Edwardian past he never experienced, nor does he conservatively celebrate the pre-war social order.” Instead, the “innocence of the grinning young men queuing to die in the trenches is viewed with bitter irony” which is underlined by the repetition “Never such innocence” in the last stanza. The “countryside” clashes with “shut shops” and “tin advertisements/For cocoa and twist” in the manner of pastoral, but instead of sentimentally giving in to pre-war nostalgia, the poem's “subject is history as shared tragedy”.⁹⁸ “MCMXIV” leaves no room for nostalgic patriotism. That such innocence is once more irretrievably lost in the past is emphasised in “As changed itself to past/Without a word”. The irony at the centre of the poem becomes even more

⁹⁸ Booth 2005, p. 131

embittered once it is considered that the grins “On moustached archaic faces” cannot have been innocent at all; every man in the “long uneven lines” was perfectly aware of the fact they were enlisting for war – even though they did not know what this particular war entailed. Thus, even “MCMXIV” as a poem often read as one of Larkin’s rare instances of nostalgic patriotism, merely recalls “the battered scraps of history left behind by our parents or our parents’ parents”⁹⁹ instead of erecting a nostalgic monument.

However, (pastoral) retreat is one of Larkin’s characteristic postures. Far from the idea of a leafy, sunny pastoral retreat in a hermetically sealed Arcadia Larkin creates a retreat all of his own: the retreat into the self. And occasionally his evocation of this retreat employs pastoral images. We have already seen how various existent and non-existent doors in Larkin’s poetry of non-place either offer a retreat as in “Best Society” or underline how tragically unavailable this retreat remains for his speakers. The speaker in “Best Society” not only closes or slams the door behind him; he also locks it to ensure the world safely remains on the other side. The retreat in “Best Society” is entirely abstract: “Uncontracting solitude/Supports me on its giant palm”. The speaker is not only safe from the rest of the world but safely ensconced in the loving hands of solitude in an almost transcendental image. But furthermore, solitude not only supports the speaker, but lets his true self break through the surface: “there cautiously/Unfolds, emerges, what I am.” Retreat from society is rewarded with the recognition of the self. However, it is the rest of a community literally waiting behind the closed door that transforms a mere room to a retreat. In this way, “Best Society” connotes the willing retreat from society into the abstract Arcadia of transcendent self-possession.

Again, this is very obviously a far cry from the pastoral retreat that Gifford has in

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 131

mind when he elaborates on the pastoral discourse of retreat and return, but it is just one more indication that Larkin “does something with the device pastoral” - to preserve Gifford’s terminology.

Throughout Larkin’s poetry, there are manifold instances in which some kind of retreat manifests itself. The lighthouse-keeper in “Livings II” is maybe in the most literal retreat from the world in all of Larkin’s poetry. He exclaims “Keep it all off!”, but at the same time remains connected with the rest of the world by means of the radio “Telling me of elsewhere”. Once more this is only a partial retreat as “absolute individuality is unthinkable.”¹⁰⁰ The poem makes use of a quasi-pastoral metaphor in “the salt/unsown stirring fields” for the sea, but this is a far cry from conventional pastoral imagery. “This Be The Verse” warns “Get out as early as you can” and thus implies a kind of retreat. Larkin’s retreats realize versions of Arcadia as a kind of metaphysical non-place. Retreats in Larkin are more often than not unattainable but pose the possibility of place without “relations, history or identity” in Augé’s sense. Betjeman’s nostalgia for “Henley-on-Thames” with its “elder-scented shade”¹⁰¹ or “Essex” where “blue willows catch the sun”¹⁰² is always bound up with actual, but nonetheless idealised place.

Larkin’s retreat is somewhat clearer-sighted. The “unfenced existence” that is “Facing the sun, untalkative, out of reach” in “Here” appears as retreat. Interestingly, the arrival at this very retreat goes hand in hand with the echo of a natural Arcadia: “Here leaves unnoticed thicken”, “Hidden weeds flower, neglected waters quicken”, “Luminously-peopled air ascends”, “And past the poppies bluish neutral distance/Ends the land suddenly beyond a beach”. “Here” is the only poem in Larkin’s *oeuvre* that explicitly

¹⁰⁰ Augé 1995, p. 19

¹⁰¹ Betjeman 2006, p. 84

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, pp. 158 ff.

mentions “pastoral”. It is the reality of the “terminate and fishy-smelling pastoral” that sharpens the contrast between reality and metaphysical retreat. The poem juxtaposes city and country in the manner of pastoral: “Electric mixers, toasters, washers, driers” collide with “scarecrows, haystacks, hares and pheasants”; the “large town” on the one hand meets “isolate villages” on the other hand; there are “tattoo shops”, but there are “wheat-fields, running high as hedges”, too. Indeed, “Here” appears as the embodiment of contemporary pastoral.

The danger Gifford sees in contemporary pastoral is “the inability to return to a recognisable human society.”¹⁰³ In the Larkinesque version of pastoral, there is no such danger, simply because the human society remains ever-present. The “cut-price crowd” appears immediately familiar; as do the “grim head-scarfed wives”. Larkin’s pastoral retreat is no literary construct; Larkin’s “beach/Of shapes and shingle” is just as real as the city with its “domes and statues, spires and cranes”. There is no gap that needs to be bridged between the reality of a recognisable human society and the place where “Hidden weeds flower”, because both levels exist simultaneously. They are real and they are now. Larkin’s human society remains recognisable. However, the Larkinesque Arcadia, his welcoming, positive non-place, is located on the other side of a void that remains tragically unbridgeable.

With the provincialism of “Bridge for the Living” and “Going, Going” and the local references of “Here”, Larkin’s version of pastoral seems to measure up to Thomas Tickell’s eighteenth century postulation of “the creation of an indigenous British pastoral by local colour rather than by the example of the ancients.”¹⁰⁴ But this is not what “Here” is about. The city in “Here” - whether it is Hull or not does not matter - is a real place with relations and history, offset by the speaker’s determined search for a

¹⁰³ Gifford 1999, p. 111

¹⁰⁴ Quoted in: Halperin 1983, p. 41

private non-place. The speaker's familiarity with the place manifests itself in the details of the "flat-faced trolleys" and the "plate glass swing doors"; otherwise the "piled gold clouds" and "the shining gull-marked mud" would not be possible. All this focuses on a fluent movement – the urban elements do not flow differently from the rural ones – in the direction of the beach and thus to the ultimate freedom of "unfenced existence". Similar to the relieving solitude in "Best Society", "Here" focuses on the self, not the cultural context in which the "grim head-scarfed wives" do their shopping. City and country are merely the social backdrop against which the idea of self is explored. "Here" does not denote a specific cultural approach, it denotes an intrinsic movement. Local colour "Here" might have, but this local colour paints *a* town and not *the* England. The national is exclusive; the provincial is not.

Heaney praises Wordsworth as "the first man to articulate the nature that becomes available to the feelings through dwelling in one dear perpetual place"¹⁰⁵ Maybe that is the key not only to Larkin's version of pastoral, but also to his underdeveloped notion of belonging, his suspicion of cultural communities and the attraction of non-place: Larkin very simply has no "dear perpetual place". Wordsworth finds his "dear perpetual place" in Grasmere; Heaney has Mossbawn; Betjeman everything his Shell guides offer; Yeats has Innisfree; there is no equivalent in Larkin's work. "Mr Bleaney" has little more than the contents of "one hired box" as home; the speaker in "Poetry of Departures" declares "We all hate home" and "I detest my room"; in "Reference Back" the speaker plays "record after record" in an "unsatisfactory room", "wasting my time at home"; the speaker in "Friday Night In The Royal Station Hotel" betrays an absence of home in the parenthesis "(if home existed)"; there is the poem "Home Is So Sad".

¹⁰⁵ Quoted in: Gifford 1999, p. 100

Larkin himself wrote to Robert Conquest telling him about his “one hideous room”¹⁰⁶, wrote in a letter to Anselm and Judy Egerton “I wish I could think of just one nice thing to tell you about Hull”¹⁰⁷ and again to Conquest about “living in this dump”.¹⁰⁸ Despite this profession of a fundamental abstract - not literal - homelessness, Larkin’s poetry feeds off the tension between the unsatisfactory anthropological places and the unavailable positive non-place, the pastoral retreat.

Furthermore, Larkin’s version of pastoral seems to dispense with characters altogether. In Theocritus’ *Idylls* there are manifold characters including Corydon, Daphnis, Alexis or Amaryllis; Marvell has Clorinda and Damon. There is Endymion in Keats. Wordsworth has his Michael; even the German Goethe has the pastoral couple Hermann and Dorothea; Housman has his Shropshire lad and Heaney has his father and grandfather to look to.

“Here” as the most pastoral of Larkin’s poems employs not a single personal pronoun. The “workmen” and the “residents from raw estates” along with the “head-scarfed wives” are no characters, they are mere sketches serving to illustrate the city and as a contrast to the “unfenced existence”. “Mr Bleaney” remains the formal Mr Bleaney; his first name would catapult him into some kind of intimacy; intimacy he lacks lying on (not “in”!) “the fusty bed”. Intimacy would make him a character; in Larkin he remains a mere persona. Dockery in “Dockery And Son” has no first name, either, making him just one of the many that are younger than the speaker in the poem who thinks that “To have no son, no wife,/No house or land still seemed quite natural”. Whereas Heaney in “Digging” looks up to his father and his father before him, bridging the gap to his grandfather by memories of how he brought him a bottle of milk, Larkin’s mother in

¹⁰⁶ *SL*, p. 245

¹⁰⁷ *SL*, p. 246

¹⁰⁸ *SL*, p. 341

“Reference Back” remains an undefined “she”. Larkin’s pastoral simply has no characters. Or as Andrew Motion puts it: “social relations are given short shrift by Larkin – largely because of his view that circumstances drive people back into isolation.”¹⁰⁹ But Larkin’s individual first personal singular speakers let us get so much closer to the core of humanity than any third person character ever could.

The absence of characters in Larkin’s pastoral counts towards universality in his poetry. Relinquishing characters offers Larkin the chance to come at the Stoics’ identity circles via the outmost circle of common humanity, while the local colour – provincialism – is universally recognisable in its particular perspective. Larkin’s pastoral speakers are in no illusion about the fabrication of a sentimental retreat. Larkin dispenses with the forced group-identity of assumed shepherds.

It is perhaps exactly this outlook that makes Larkin’s pastoral the appropriate contemporary pastoral. Theocritus was already aware of this fabrication when he warned that “Wherever you tread the ground’s one thorny ambush”¹¹⁰:

Life in this country [Theocritus’ Sicily] is far from idyllic for the two herdsmen Corydon and Battus [...]. Corydon believes, for all his living at one with nature, that the only language understood by a calf stealing from an olive tree is a heavy stick. He knows that sandals have to be worn in this idyll”¹¹¹

to protect his feet from the “thorny ambush”. In this sense, pastoral has really been clear-sighted from its classical roots onwards and Larkin had enough reason to dismiss classical “conventions such as pastoral” as “wan substitutes for imagination.”¹¹²

Larkin’s “Here”, however, appears as full-blooded contemporary pastoral. There is the clash of the urban and the rural; there is a clash between the “Hidden weeds” and “unfenced existence”. There is nostalgia, albeit for the present. There is no danger of

¹⁰⁹ Andrew Motion, “Philip Larkin and Symbolism” in: Stephen Regan, (ed.), *Philip Larkin Contemporary Critical Essays*, Palgrave Macmillan, Houndmills, Basingstoke, 1997, p.36

¹¹⁰ Quoted in: Gifford 1999, p. 120

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 16

¹¹² RW, p. 253

escapism as everything happens here and now. Instead of rosy transfiguration and a warm and fuzzy English nostalgia à la Betjeman, Larkin creates pastoral in its purest form without sentimentality, without political implications and without a concrete and thus restrictively idealized Arcadia. It is not the “sentimental”, but the “complex pastoral”¹¹³ and thus comfortably aware of its provincialism. Its undeceived provincialism appears universal.

If Larkin's ‘provincial’ pastoral poems thus evade notions of a specific cultural identity, there is one poem which uncharacteristically seeks to assert a quite simple nationalism. “Homage to a Government” is ideologically explicit, though its rhetoric is profoundly problematic. Its title betrays the poem's sarcastic stance, lamenting the close of the British military base in Aden for financial reasons. This action “becomes emblematic of a nation deprived of the reach and resources of the *imperium*.”¹¹⁴ The speaker is bleakly resigned in the face of the facts: “Next year we are to bring the soldiers home/For lack of money”. The rhyme scheme abccab falls back on itself repeating exactly the same words within each stanza (“home, right, orderly, orderly, home, right”, etc.) creating a strangely resigned, even exhausted effect. Its simplicity also perhaps shows a certain childish defiance on the part of the speaker. This is further underlined with the repetitions of “next year” and “it/this/which is all right” in the first two stanzas. We are not dealing here with a considered discussion of the political incident; we are confronted with stubborn philistine defiance.

The personal pronouns in this poem are once more revealing. We have already seen that Larkin's more universalist poems successfully negotiate questions of belonging and isolation through their pronouns; “Homage to a Government” - like “Bridge for the

¹¹³ Gifford 1999, p. 149 – note that Gifford uses both terms in inverted commas indicating that both forms are ultimately still pastoral as such.

¹¹⁴ Jahan Ramazani, “Poetry and Decolonization” in: *A Concise Companion to Postwar British and Irish Poetry*, Nigel Alderman and C.D. Blanton (eds.), Blackwell Publishers Ltd., Oxford, 2009, p.121

Living”, though with a different effect - merely resorts to the first person plural noun “we” in and the third person plural “they” of the soldiers that are brought home. If the speaker were really concerned about the status of the Empire and if the community construct “we” was consistent, he would surely employ the possessive pronoun “our soldiers” instead of “the soldiers” and “its soldiers” and the title would surely read “Homage to *Our* Government”. Similarly, if the speaker was concerned with the moral and ethical implications of closing the military base for financial reasons, he would make more detailed reference to Aden instead of merely relating to “[p]laces they guarded” and “[t]he places” which “are a long way off”. Thus, ‘place’ in “Homage to a Government” is merely geographical location without subtext or further implication. Usually in Larkin, place is something altogether more potent as for instance, in “Places, Loved Ones”, where place refers to “*my proper ground*”; a place in life, a place of belonging, an anthropological place, not merely a geographical location. “Homage to a Government” thus sparks with petty righteousness instead of real concern for, or comprehension of, the situation.

The first person plural pronouns of “Homage to a Government” imply the existence of a community of shared opinions and it may be the only poem in Larkin’s *oeuvre* in which “at home”, “here” and “country” (used twice) refer to England and England only. This is underlined by the possessive pronoun in “our children” which almost aggressively demands consent in the matter. Everyone should be concerned when money for military expeditions is used to spoil the lazy. “We want the money for ourselves at home/Instead of working” is pure polemic. The community expressed by the first person plural pronoun is thus the target for righteous indignation and satiric exaggeration but at the same time curiously functions as the back-up for the speaker’s indignation. Opinions are always more persuasive when there is an invisible ‘we all

think so' hovering in the background. Curiously, the speaker does not seem to know exactly at whom to direct his scorn; there is no clear-cut line between identification with the community and irony directed at the community. The speaker's scorn remains ambiguously without focus.

Whether a successful poem or not, "Homage to a Government" remains connected not to a broader English context, but to a specific political event that does not allow for a universal interpretation. With its lack of "sophisticated rhetoric"¹¹⁵ "Homage to a Government" falls short of the mark of a historico-political poem. It might well "dissociate[] the whole question of decolonisation from its confused and complex history"¹¹⁶, but this is exactly its fault. It shuns "confused and complex history" for an undirected, uninformed vendetta against amorphous powers that be and an equally unpersuasive perception of national community. Whereas Heaney's "Requiem for the Croppies" or Muldoon's "Meeting the British" single out historico-political events to underline the history of oppressed peoples, Larkin's speaker childishly pouts in the face of money politics. When Alun R. Jones sees Larkin embrace "the provincial, and the purely personal"¹¹⁷ he may be right in the case of "Homage to a Government".

"Naturally the Foundation will Bear Your Expenses" from 1961 appears to point in the same direction despite the speaker's casually professed cosmopolitanism. His stance as a travelling scholar well into the business of giving lectures in different places – even if it is the same lecture twice or even three times by the time the lecture is published ("I pondered pages Berkeley/Not three weeks since had heard/Perceiving Chatto darkly/Through the mirror of the Third") – betrays an off-hand, studied ennui that thinly

¹¹⁵ Swarbrick 1995, p. 140

¹¹⁶ Stan Smith, *Inviolable Voice: History and Twentieth-Century Poetry*, Gill and Macmillan, Dublin, 1982, p. 179

¹¹⁷ Alun R. Jones "The Poetry of Philip Larkin: A Note on Transatlantic Culture" in: *Phoenix* 11/12 (Larkin Issue), Harry Chambers (ed.), 1973-74, p. 144

veils a certain arrogance.¹¹⁸

The pronouns in the poem confirm this view. The first person singular pronoun “I” appears four times in three stanzas (compare the “other” train-ride poem “The Whitsun Weddings”, in which the first person singular pronoun appears five times in more than twice as many stanzas) underlining the self-assuredness of the speaker. His matter-of-fact use of the possessive pronoun “my” (“my Comet”, “my taxi”, “my contact”, “my pal”) is yet another indicator for the speaker’s *hauteur*, when surely he was not the only passenger on his “Comet”-plane and the taxi surely belonged to a taxi company. This impression is confirmed by the regular rhyme scheme with the alternating rhymes ababcdcd whose simplicity is yet another indicator for the speaker’s studied ennui. He has been there and done that but is all too satisfied with his status as someone who is published by Chatto and friends with professors all over the world. The use of the expression “pal” in this context emphasizes an exaggerated chumminess that is set against the wholehearted implications of the word “friend”.

“Naturally the Foundation will Bear Your Expenses” once more sets the speaker apart from a “colourless and careworn” crowd. But where in poems like “The View” the crowd poses a quiet menace, in “Naturally...” the speaker rises above the crowd. The bright “sunshine of Bombay” is set against the greyness of the inferior crowd that obstructs the progress of the speaker’s taxi on his superior mission to the airport.

The smooth plosives in the first letters of “Berkeley” and “Bombay” are set against a “dark November” London which is not even mentioned by name. “Whitehall” here does not serve as *pars pro toto* for London, but stands for the national ritual of laying down wreaths on Remembrance Day: “Wreath-rubbish in Whitehall”. After his bored

¹¹⁸ Booth 2005, (pp. 30-31) gives much insight into the poem as a direct influence on Auden’s “On the Circuit”; one would have expected Larkin to pay homage to the older poet; in fact, it is the other way around.

enumeration “Queen and Minister/And Band of Guards and all” whose child-like defiance almost matches that of “Homage to a Government”, the scholar for once drops his ennui and forgets about his intellectual register. To him the ritual of remembrance is nothing more than “Wreath-rubbish”. “Solemn-sinister”, however, the neologism, betrays the intellectual reminding the reader perhaps of the emotional tone in “This Be the Verse” in which parents are “soppy-stern”.

The “solemn-sinister/Wreath-rubbish in Whitehall” with its almost-alliteration that is lost in the speaker’s disdain for the annual ceremony deconstructs his carefully constructed cosmopolitanism. His marked haughtiness suddenly evaporates in his passionate irreverence for the national ritual and exchanges casual cosmopolitanism for petty provincialism. The speaker’s snide “It used to make me throw up” with its pronounced use of the past tense is supposed to restore his dignity with his ‘I’m over it’-attitude but cannot be taken seriously after his emotional outburst in the previous line. The exclamation “O when will England grow up?” is an exasperated display of superiority; an attempt to distance himself from his pronounced emotion and to clarify that he places himself over narrow-minded “cultural heritage”. Significantly, this makes “Naturally the Foundation will Bear Your Expenses” another of those poems in which Larkin explicitly mentions England. The lack of a new rhyme in “It used to make me throw up” and “O when will England grow up?” betrays the speaker’s exasperation and emotion. He is not as fully detached from the national ritual as he makes out to be.

It is quite clear that “It used to make me throw up” refers to the “Wreath-rubbish” of Remembrance Day and the speaker’s distaste for national ritual, but it is also rather telling to see the line in connection to the speaker’s whereabouts: he is about to “outsoar the Thames” - on a plane. If one were to press the meaning a little and read “It used to make me throw up” as an underlying reference to the feeling one gets when a plane

accelerates on the runway the line throws an interesting light on the speaker's past: he has not always been the worldly-wise, casually travelling intellectual. With "I outsoar the Thames" Larkin's speaker returns to his detached register; his eyes half-shut with superior boredom.

However, the poem's structure speaks a different language. The musings on Remembrance Day merely seem to be bracketed into the scholar's busy travelling schedule which he promptly resumes, but this paradoxically grants the national ceremony special attention: the loathed event stands in the middle of the poem. The speaker's attempted cosmopolitan outlook between lectures in California and India is marred by his provincial concern for an English national ritual. As an apparent member of a "post-modern cosmopolitan culture" that is "indifferent to place and time", that "is here and now and everywhere"¹¹⁹ Larkin's speaker professes his distaste towards national culture and thus acknowledges it. The scholar in "Naturally the Foundation will Bear Your Expenses" is not "here and now and everywhere", he is very much in England. Even the cosmopolitan intellectual cannot seem to shake off his cultural identity – despite his best efforts.

A.D. Smith states in his work on *National Identities* that "a sense of common identity and belonging" within a nation is established by "shared values, symbols and traditions" – among such symbols flags, war memorials and ceremonies of remembrance for the national dead. Through these symbols "members [of a nation] are reminded of their common heritage and cultural kinship."¹²⁰ This view would clearly make "Naturally the Foundation will Bear Your Expenses" a narrowly English poem especially seeing that the reader not familiar with the English ceremony faces the arduous task of finding clues ("dark November day", "the day", "Queen and Minister/And Band of Guards") to

¹¹⁹ A.D. Smith, *National Identities*, Penguin Books, London, 1991, p. 158

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 17

decipher the “Wreath-rubbish in Whitehall” as Remembrance Day – a very English ceremony.

But there are several complications. Firstly, as in “Going, Going” or “Homage to a Government”, the speaker is uneasy about identifying with a national community. Despite acknowledging an imagined (national) community in Anderson’s sense, the speakers of “Going, Going”, “Homage to a Government” and “Naturally the Foundation will Bear Your Expenses” are constantly re-evaluating and questioning their role as members of this imagined community. The speaker in “Naturally the Foundation will Bear Your Expenses” may be exasperated by the “mawkish nursery games” but still passionately reacts to the ceremony. The fact that Siegfried Sassoon and other ‘war heroes’ showed typical English independence by boycotting Remembrance Day sheds an interesting light on the speaker’s apparent cosmopolitanism. Discussing nation and identity, Ross Poole underlines that “What is important is not so much that everyone imagines the same nation, but that they imagine they imagine the same nation.”¹²¹ Larkin’s speakers, however, never seem to be quite positive that they are on the same page as the rest of the community they witness.

The stance of the speaker in “Naturally...” is further complicated by the uncertainty of the poet behind the poem. Larkin himself was prompted to write the poem because his friends were living the life of the travelling scholar. Robert Conquest held talks in front of the Poetry Society in Leicester in 1961 and Larkin discovered “how similar” his own personality was to that of A.E. Housman noting in a letter with characteristic wryness “except of course that I can’t compete with his swash-buckling Errol-Flynn-like activity, travelling and eating and becoming Professor of Poetry.”¹²² The ironic tone thinly veils Larkin’s jealousy. The speaker in “Naturally...” negotiates between cultural

¹²¹ Ross Poole, *Nation and Identity*, Routledge, Abingdon, 1999, p. 16

¹²² *SL*, p. 332

identity and cosmopolitanism while the poet seems to try to negotiate between his unsatisfactory rootedness and his jealousy for the “continent-hopping craps”.¹²³ Much like the speaker in “Poetry of Departures”, Larkin seems to be envious of the kind of man who “*chucked up everything/And just cleared off*” but finds himself unable to follow his lead. The speaker in “Poetry of Departures” is excited by the prospect, even ponders “Surely I can, if he did?”, but stays put as the pastoral “nut-strewn roads” appear just as artificial as his perfectly ordered home life with “the good books, the good bed”. He seems to crave a balance between the two extremes. Ultimately, Larkin criticizes exactly the cosmopolitan extreme in Auden who hovers not-so-invisibly behind “Naturally...”. In a letter to Patsy Strang from the same time, “W.H.A” is “that cosmopolitan lisp[ing] no-good”.¹²⁴ Larkin criticizes the ‘American’ Auden not for emigrating, but for “abandon[ing] his audience together with their common dialect and concerns.”¹²⁵ – on both sides of the Atlantic.

Auden has not, in fact, gone in the direction one hoped: he has not adopted America or taken root, but has pursued an individual and cosmopolitan path which has precluded the kind of identification that seemed so much a part of his previous successes.¹²⁶

What Larkin seems to propagate here is a balance between rootedness and cosmopolitanism. Had Auden “taken root” in the American culture, his view would have become more convincing. That Auden should ‘reply’ to Larkin’s emotional turmoil in “Naturally...” with the decidedly less layered “On the Circuit” is almost ironic.

If we once more return to the seemingly contradictory nature of cosmopolitanism and provincialism, something else becomes apparent. In “Naturally the Foundation will Bear Your Expenses”, Larkin also seems to negotiate the opinion he expresses several

¹²³ *SL*, p.330

¹²⁴ *SL*, p. 315

¹²⁵ *RW*, p. 125

¹²⁶ *RW*, p. 127

years later in his speech accepting the *Shakespeare Prize* in Hamburg. Ironically, this was a virtually unique occasion on which he allowed himself to be cast in the role of an Auden, Housman or Conquest in “Naturally the Foundation will Bear Your Expenses”:

But over both the concert hall and the lecture room hangs the common problem of displacement. For if a poet is to live by selling not only his poems but his reading of them and his views on poetry in general, he is bound to follow the market to find fresh audiences and fresh fees, and this will lead him from country to country and from continent to continent until his sense of cultural identity becomes blurred and weakened. Once again comes the question, is this a bad thing? Isn't it better to belong to the world, in any and every sense, rather than to one bit of it? Politically, it may be; poetically, I am not so sure.¹²⁷

“Belonging to the world” in Larkin's sense would thus refer to a cosmopolitanism that allows us to

explore our Celtic roots on Monday, spend Tuesday celebrating the Buddha's birthday in our neighbourhood temple, on Wednesday join a Greenpeace demonstration against international whaling, and take part on Thursday in a critical discussion of British imperialism.¹²⁸

and is set against the security of a safe cultural identity. Larkin doubts the merits of cosmopolitanism and fears the poet's loss of identity. If global culture really is “here and now and everywhere”¹²⁹, then Larkin's poetry clearly gains a cosmopolitan dimension. His speakers are “here” (compare the title of “Here”), they are now (“We are not suited to the long perspectives” in “Reference Back”) and they are “everywhere” (the poem is called “Here” not “Hull”). Larkin refers to himself as the “Laforgue of Pearson Park”¹³⁰, reveres the New Orleans style jazz of Sidney Bechet and looks to Yeats for inspiration while simultaneously fearing the loss of cultural identity and resorting to the safely provincial in “Going, Going” and “Homage to a Government”.

The concept of cosmopolitanism is rendered vague through its “fluid and

¹²⁷ *RW*, p. 89

¹²⁸ Miller 1995, p. 186

¹²⁹ Smith 1991, p. 158

¹³⁰ *SL*, p. 460

shapeless”¹³¹ character. Artists subscribing to cosmopolitanism as a means to overcome national borders run the danger of cutting their cultural roots. As a result, their art is not magically endowed with international grandeur but retains all the negative connotations of cosmopolitanism’s fluidity and shapelessness. Instead of standing in the centre of the evenly distributed concentric circles of his cultural identities – many of whom he will share with his fellow human beings - the rootless cosmopolitan artist dances hoola-hoop with the solitary outmost circle of common humanity. No matter how good he is, we all know the hoop will eventually fall. It will fall because it lacks connection to a specific cultural background. The truly cosmopolitan poet thus has to place at least one foot in the circles’ centre before he starts gyrating. Larkin himself put this nicely in “Best Society”: “for what/You are alone has, to achieve/The rank of fact, to be expressed/In terms of others”. Or, to put it more concisely: “Cosmopolitan identities, like other identities, are the product of social relations.”¹³²

Poole adapts the idea of Kai Nielsen to underline that rootless cosmopolitanism is hardly imaginable:

To be cosmopolitan in Nielsen’s sense is to be someone who is at home in a wide variety of social, political and cultural contexts. [...] One’s self-understanding may well be rooted in a specific country and its language, history, literature, political institutions and the like, and these may define a range of moral responsibilities and commitments which are all but unescapable. However, one will also be knowledgeable and appreciate of the different responsibilities and commitments of others. For this reason, the ‘rootless cosmopolitan’ of populist mythology would only be capable of a superficial understanding of different cultures, including his or her own.¹³³

In this way, cosmopolitanism appears only superficially as an escape route from a narrow nationalism and the ubiquity of national identity. It only seems as if it serves as a means of bypassing national identity and the collective history of the national

¹³¹ Smith 1991, p. 158

¹³² Sidney Tarrow, “Rooted Cosmopolitans and Transnational Activists” prepared for a special issue of the *Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia*, 2004 accessed online 19/04/09
<http://falcon.arts.cornell.edu/Govt/faculty/Tarrow%20docs/rooted%20cosmopolitans.pdf>

¹³³ Poole 1999, p. 162

community. Indeed, as Smith underlines, ideas of history and myth will always connect to the discourse of specific national and ethnic identity. In the sphere of cosmopolitanism

[i]t may be possible to manufacture traditions and to package imagery, but images and traditions will be sustained only if they have some popular resonance, and they will have that resonance only if they can be harmonized and made continuous with a perceived collective past.¹³⁴

It is interesting that Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent" should have connected the idea of the significance of tradition to the arts, and specifically to writing, long before the idea of the "rooted cosmopolitan"¹³⁵ was first expressed. Bruce King puts this somewhat more concisely and draws the connection to questions of national identity:

There is [...] a reason why creative writing and nationalism usually only meet as ideals, reactions and protest. The writer is part of international culture. The language, conventions and *genres* of his work have been shaped by tradition, by past art, by centuries of European culture. His work is an evolution from such a heritage. Local culture can provide subject-matter, themes, myths, a perspective and speech as a basis for a new style, but cannot offer an alternative to what are essentially forms of communication that have been developed by Western culture.¹³⁶

It is thus the task of the artist to successfully negotiate local, national and international culture and common humanity - without stepping into the cosmopolitan trap of curiously amorphous fluidity.

Eliot clarifies this idea:

Just as we recognize that parts of Britain must have, in one sense, a common culture, though this common culture is only actual in diverse local manifestations, so we must aspire to a common world culture, which will yet not diminish the particularity of the constituent parts.¹³⁷

¹³⁴ Smith 1991, p. 159

¹³⁵ According to Simon Tarrow in his 2004 essay, the term "rooted cosmopolitan" was coined by Mitchell Cohen in *Dissent* in 1992, p.7

¹³⁶ Bruce King, *The New English Literatures Cultural Nationalism in a Changing World*, The Macmillan Press Ltd., Houndmills, Basingstoke, 1980, p. 231

¹³⁷ T.S. Eliot, *Notes Towards a Definition of Culture*, Faber and Faber Ltd., London, 1948, p. 62

Larkin might refer local culture, but with a common world culture ('common humanity') in mind. It is thus that provincialism and cosmopolitanism in Larkin are merely two sides of the same coin. Larkin's local British culture thus works as an anchor in a broader, recognizable world culture. James Booth states that Larkin "writes about universals with an English inflection".¹³⁸ I would like to modify this statement slightly: Larkin's (provincial) universals become credible *because* of his English inflection.

¹³⁸ Booth 2005, p. 141

Chapter 3

'Looking out at the continual movement of mad Irish': Larkin and Ireland

In a letter of October 1952 Larkin writes to Winifred Arnott, who had just moved to her family's house:

I'm always suspicious of family ties: my advice to anyone of advisory age is, get away from your family, camp on the sweet-smelling fields of strangers, & then you can start to think of the next move."¹³⁹

– a somewhat less crudely formulated version of his 1971 poem "This Be The Verse": "Get out as quickly as you can". When Larkin moved to Ireland to become sub-librarian at Queen's University Belfast in September 1950, Belfast became exactly such a sweet-smelling anonymous field where the young librarian could escape the family ties of which he was so suspicious. Moving to Belfast meant leaving everything behind. At best, deciding to take a new job and move to a different country is a complicated process of decision-making. For Larkin, however, things developed quickly and enabled him to leave behind personal conditions that were increasingly bearing down on him. Ever since his father Sydney had died in March 1948, Larkin had been responsible for his mother – a responsibility that he considered more and more a chore. After weeks of indecisiveness on his part, Ruth Bowman had returned his engagement ring. Larkin was not only relieved of his family responsibilities; he was also single again. The poem he wrote on the night boat from Liverpool to Belfast - neither finished nor published during the poet's lifetime - on September 16th, 1950 already plays with the notions of

¹³⁹ *SL*, p. 190

new beginnings and old baggage in its title. Buying a single ticket instead of a return ticket manifested his intentions of remaining in Belfast, effectively upping his sticks in England. Additionally, the title suggests he travels alone, without metaphorical baggage leaving behind not only personal ties but his native country to enter an altogether new, unfamiliar cultural community. Despite the promise of “sweet-smelling fields”, the predominant sentiment in “Single to Belfast” is one of loss, of the present slipping between the speaker’s fingers. His “present is really stiffening to past” in a parallel movement to the boat moving “down a lane of tame water” leaving behind Liverpool, the “lighted, stationary city”. Instead of going below deck to find some distraction in the “corridors curved like a theatre’s” he opts to “remain on deck” “to watch the lights/Burn”.

The “tame water” in “Single to Belfast” is almost a disappointment compared with later images of the sea in his work: “*waves fold behind villages*” offsets the strangely muted atmosphere in “Friday Night in the Royal Station Hotel”, the “sea explodes upwards” in “Livings II” to express an almost gleeful solitary vividness and there are “small hushed waves” in the picturesque tranquillity of “To the Sea”. The pathetic fallacy in “Single to Belfast” does not express the speaker’s reluctance to go; both waters and speaker remain calm. He may feel grief and a sense of loss for things past, but there is no one to blame but himself so he cannot possibly protest, only feel resigned. The speaker gives in to his life moving on without overt drama: “my life committing itself to the long bend” in which the movement of the boat itself is once more mirrored.

Uncharacteristically for Larkin, the speaker in “Single to Belfast” mourns the loss of anthropological place: “away from my midland/Emollient valley”. The possessive pronoun “my” coupled with the altogether positive, soothing adjective “emollient”

makes for a rare instance of apparent rootedness in Larkin's poetry. The speaker in "Single to Belfast" really seems to have had a place of belonging. The parallel construction "away from my midland/Emollient valley, away from the lack of questions,/Away from endearments" emphasizes everything the speaker leaves behind. However, the double negative construction "away from the lack of questions" rings slightly ambiguously in this context. Instead of enumerating "certitude" or "emotional safety", the double negative hints at the fact that "lack of questions" is not necessarily positive. There is an uncertain air about the entire poem. Similarly to the speaker's lack of revolt and his air of resignation that merely seems to go through the motions of leaving places and loved ones behind, the ambiguous "lack of questions" seems to emphasize the fact that the speaker does not really know how to deal with the situation. It seems to be the emigrant's posture of leaving old shores behind and looking for new ones; unsure of either past or future; suspended between grief and anticipation. The speaker only allows himself to look forward to the future between the lines.

If the speaker's "midland/Emollient valley" is an anthropological place then his journey to catch the boat is one through non-places: "stairs and spaces and faces,/The nagging main-street night as seen from a bus". The enumeration with the conjunction "and" is an expression of the "partial glimpses", the "series of 'snapshots' piled hurriedly into [the traveller's] memory"¹⁴⁰ that Augé sees as symptomatic for perceptions of non-place. Furthermore, the idea of "doors left swinging" in "Single to Belfast" underlines this impression and repeats Larkin's door-*topos*. Once more, the swinging doors can be neither locked nor fully opened; they are very much like the doors of non-place in "Autobiography at an Air-Station". The doors swing and permit brief glimpses of what is on either side of them. The speaker can neither wedge the doors open to gain a full

¹⁴⁰ Augé 1995, p. 86

view nor lock them behind him to be on his own. The doors thus mirror the speaker's situation on the boat: he has neither cut off the past even though it is stiffening under his fingers nor is he fully anticipating the future. He tries instead to focus on the moment, on the "gravitational drag of loneliness", on a world that "has boiled down to a berth, a bay, a meal". However, the anticipation of loneliness is not the same as actually feeling its "gravitational drag". He can hear "voices" but he does not enter a conversation. Others are present but remain faceless.

Leaving the port the speaker watched "Crimson sky-signs clambering Liverpool dark"; his gaze moved beyond that to the journey's "stairs and spaces and faces"; then moved inward to his immediate present only to be drawn away into the distance again "To watch the lights/Burn where so much lies shrugged off behind me like gravecloths". The initial implication of the image – shrugging off gravecloths as shedding of emotional baggage and rising towards a new life – is destroyed in the next line. Leaving behind his emotional attachments makes of the speaker "a ghost" "among solid ones". In an already familiar move, Larkin's speaker creates a community of travellers to which he does not belong. He is the ghost among solid ones much like the discarnate presence in "Friday Night in the Royal Station Hotel" stands for absolute loneliness far from the soothing presence of others. The "solid ones" "cross from known to known" while the speaker "travel[s]/To unknown from lost". While the verb "cross" denotes a purposeful journey across the Irish Sea, the speaker merely "travels", making his movement less deliberate and less certain of the destination.¹⁴¹ The "solid ones" as an opposed community seem to know exactly what they are doing; the isolated "ghost" is without this certitude, almost literally lost at sea. However, much like the double negative construction "away from lack of questions", the construction "to unknown

¹⁴¹ Augé distinguishes between "the *passenger* (defined by his *destination*)" and "the *traveller* (who strolls along his *route* [...])", Augé 1995, p. 107

from lost” also has a slight ambiguity. “Unknown” as an adjective is neutral always containing the slight possibility of something positive whereas lost is clearly negative. It would be short-sighted to assume that “lost” merely refers to the brief journey to the pier. The pastoral retreat – “my midland/Emollient valley” is thus not to be taken at face value. It merely serves as a pseudo-romantic, dramatic commonplace. Under the surface of “Single to Belfast” lurks the not-yet-too-clear insight that something good might come of this change of place. This goes hand in hand with the sharp jolt, the “single haemorrhage of grief/For what I abandon”. It is only a single jolt of regret. The parallel structure

For all the familiar earths and formes of pleasure,
For all love's rare and honoured instances,
For friendship's attractive properties left to leak,
For all past good...

mirrors the parallel structure “away from...” earlier in the poem and is less convincing for its non-specific commonplaces. The self-doubts and regrets in the last stanza, “How meanly I doled myself out”, appear as a welcome focus on the self in the face of the speaker's anxiety with past, present and future. Pondering the past naturally leads to anticipation of the future. “Single to Belfast” seems deliberately to cut out this anticipation but cannot help exposing it. The future may be unknown, but this also means it is full of possibilities. The poem does not exactly “resonate[s] with a note of openness and expectation” as Terry Whalen observes, but an idea of a guarded “potential for meaning in a new context”¹⁴² is definitely to be found somewhere between the lines.

If Larkin landed in Belfast as a mere ghost among solid ones, once he was there

¹⁴² Terry Whalen, “‘Strangeness Made Sense’ – Philip Larkin in Ireland” in: *The Antigonish Review* 107, Autumn 1996, accessed online 18/11/2007 <http://www.antigonishreview.com/bi-107/107-whalen.html> - no page numbers given

Ireland proceeded to draw “Larkin out of his shell”¹⁴³ kickstarting his most productive time as a poet. It is paradoxically the ghostliness of his situation that allows Larkin’s speaker to find some peace on the fringes of a cultural community that is not his own. “Arrival” from 1950 as one of the poems Whalen incorporates in Larkin’s “Ireland cluster” radiates with the anticipation of a clean slate for the future despite its typically bleak ending. “Arrival” neatly offers itself as the continuation of the journey begun in “Single to Belfast”. Indeed, nothing within the poem points towards the “new city” as Belfast. It is yet another testimony of Larkin’s poetic skill to de-personalize his personal experience in order to aim at universal validity. Whalen rightly notes that Larkin’s “best poems written in Ireland were not necessarily about Ireland at all, even if his sensations of Ireland were background to the creation of some of them.”¹⁴⁴

The speaker in “Arrival” arrives in the morning, which implies hope and promise in this “new city”. For once, Larkin’s speaker has the chance to walk through a door. Significantly, it is “a glass door” which lets the speaker see through to the other side. Instead of a firmly locked door as in “Best Society” or the consumerism-tinged “plate-glass swing doors” in “Here” that threaten to spit the speaker out on the other side if he is not careful, this door is less threatening, more bridgeable, even a welcoming border between the self and a community. This “new city” is drenched in sunshine as the morning “flashes/Gold names”. Interestingly, the “white shelves and domes” of the “new city” seem echoed by the “domes and statues” of “Here” and the “white towers” of “Bridge for the Living”, both written much later. Both of the later poems - as we have seen – are rare instances of identification with a place on the part of the speaker, similarly the “new city” in “Arrival” at least seems to hold the possibility of becoming a place of belonging. And indeed, the speaker “land[s] to stay here”. In a letter to his

¹⁴³ Whalen 1996

¹⁴⁴ Whalen 1996

friend Jim Sutton at the beginning of November 1950, Larkin remarked: "Coming to a new place always cheers me up for a while".¹⁴⁵ The poem seems to mirror Larkin's sentiment.

The speaker in "Arrival" once more underlines the finality of buying a single ticket. But instead of mourning the "present stiffening to past/Right under my eyes" as in "Single to Belfast" the speaker in the later poem seems to have ditched his emotional ballast. This becomes clear in the anaphora starting with "And" in the last three lines of the first of stanza: "And the windows flock open/And the curtains fly out like doves/And the past dries in a wind." The anaphora is reminiscent of that in "Single to Belfast" ("For all the familiar earths.../For all love's rare.../For friendship's.../For all past good"). But whereas that in "Single to Belfast" expresses a somewhat clichéd grief at things left behind, the mantra-like anaphora in "Arrival" literally counters the emotional baggage with images of lightness - "flock", "doves", "wind". The reader may notice the difference between this and the faintly weepy "the present is really stiffening to past" in "Single to Belfast".

This impression is enhanced by "Now" at the beginning of the second stanza. The speaker's undirected invocation "let me lie down, under a wide-branched indifference" proves significant in the context of a new location. If one's anthropological place is 'where one has one's roots' to use the expression from Larkin's "I Remember, I Remember" with all the implications of social relations and responsibilities, then "wide-branched indifference" is at exactly the opposite end of the metaphorical tree. Roots in the ground tie the poet to an imagined community; branches, stretching into the empty air, are images of freedom. "Arrival" with its "new city" seems to be one of the instances in Larkin, along with "Here", where non-place becomes desirable place

¹⁴⁵ *SL*, p. 168

exactly because it is free from the relational, historical and the identity that Augé connects with anthropological place.

Instead of worrying about his place in the face of a (hostile) community around him as the speakers in Larkin so often do, the speaker in “Arrival” can “Shovel faces like pennies/Down to the back of mind”. The “faces” that epitomize social strain in “The Building” and “Ambulances” can suddenly be blanked out in “Arrival”. And while the speaker in “Single to Belfast” ensconced in his private cabin could hear the “voices” on the boat, while not participating for fear of aligning himself with a community, the speaker in “Arrival” can actively “Find voices coined to/An argot of motor-horns” without being too concerned with them.

These are non-threatening voices. This is a community of which the speaker has not yet become part. He can happily exist on the fringes because this strange community does not (yet) claim him. Larkin himself notes in the letter to Jim Sutton that the Irish “voices are incomprehensible most of the time”¹⁴⁶ which goes hand in hand with the sentiment in the poem. Not understanding the language (even if it is only Irish English) is a sure sign of not belonging to the (national) community. “Each nation is its own world and each national language provides its own specific and unique mode of access to that world.”¹⁴⁷

“Let the cluttered-up houses/Keep their thick lives to themselves” as the second part to the undirected invocation points exactly in this direction. The speaker is content in his indifference; he likes to stay apart from the community. There is no anxiety about having to connect to the crowd, such as is palpable in “The Building” or “Autobiography at an Air-Station”. And indeed: “this ignorance of me/Seems a kind of innocence”. This is a Larkinesque paradise; it is a “milk-aired Eden” in which the

¹⁴⁶ *SL*, p. 167

¹⁴⁷ Poole 1999, p. 22

speaker does not have to worry about connecting with anyone. The “new city” is non-place in all its blissful perfection. Interestingly, the “ignorance of me” can be read both ways: the speaker is both ignorant of the community and the community has not become aware of his presence. The ignorance is mutual and thus all the more blissful because it is removed from the anxieties of social contact. However, the speaker senses that “fast enough I shall wound it”, “my own life impound it”. The lightness of the curtains flying “out like doves” in the first stanza turns into the “grey-veil-hung” reality of social anxiety, “a style of dying only”. In the same way that Augé maintains that “absolute individuality is unthinkable”¹⁴⁸ the speaker knows only too well that sooner or later he will have to engage with the community of the “new city” and give up the soothing shade of his “wide-branched indifference”. Despite its characteristically bleak ending, the “milk-aired Eden” in “Arrival” seems to be an early, less pastoral version of the “unfenced existence” in “Here”. Here the poet can find freedom from social connections and assert his individuality – as underlined by the first person singular “I” and its corresponding forms with only one contrasting “their”. The poet approaches the theoretical concept of ‘home’ abroad.

The contrast between home and elsewhere, England and Ireland, is more explicitly expressed in Larkin’s “The Importance of Elsewhere”. Written in 1955 this is the one poem that directly negotiates the relationship between the two countries: “Lonely in Ireland” in the first stanza is contrasted with “Living in England” in the third stanza. It is this contrast that invites misreadings as it seems to imply the speaker’s preference for England. Ireland is the place that “was not home” but this does not mean that England can offer the respite of ‘home’ as the perfect anthropological place. Indeed, the internal rhyme in the second and third line of the poem “sense” and “difference” already hints at

¹⁴⁸ Augé 1995, p. 19

the opposite: the speaker in “The Importance of Elsewhere” sees sense in the difference between the Irish people and himself. At the same time this also implies that the equality he should feel with the English people is literally ‘non-sense’ to him.

“The salt rebuff of speech/Insisting so on difference” refers back to the distant “voices” heard on the ferry in “Single to Belfast”, the “voices coined to/An argot of motor-horns” and Larkin’s complaint of the unintelligibility of Irish English – “a Glaswegian, after a short stay in the USA, whining for mercy”¹⁴⁹ - to Jim Sutton. Where the voices heard in “Single to Belfast” were an indicator of the speaker’s uneasiness as a ghost “among solid ones”, the voices heard in “Arrival” could comfortably be ignored in “wide-branched indifference”, the “salt rebuff of speech” in “The Importance of Elsewhere” not only finds a poetic expression for the harsh Irish English, but further elaborates on the sentiment felt in “Arrival”: “the salt rebuff of speech [...] made me welcome”. The paradoxical structure “rebuff” and “welcome” functions along the same lines in which “strangeness made sense”. It is this welcoming strangeness that leads the speaker to interaction with the community - “Once that was recognised, *we* were in touch” [emphasis mine] – while at the same time retaining a distance. Noticing the Irish community as unthreatening and so different from the uneasy, forced temporary companionship in “The Building” or the unreachable voices in “Single to Belfast” takes away the pressure of having to become one of them; there is no need to engage with their customs and establishments. It is a peaceful, if separate, co-existence of speaker and an organic community that is very much unlike the conscious decision to remain on his own in “Autobiography at an Air-Station”. This curious co-existence is further emphasized in the second stanza. The speaker does not feel the need to identify fully with the new city; what he perceives is definitely “not

¹⁴⁹ *SL*, p. 167

home”, not his place of belonging, but “*Their* draughty streets” [emphasis mine] which he can note with a casual interest and without the pressure to identify with the community or even call this place ‘home’. Significantly, while Larkin would describe the city in “Here” as a “fishy-smelling pastoral”, the smell of the Irish city in “The Importance of Elsewhere” is much more temperate and even – to a certain extent – homely: “the faint/Archaic smell of dockland, like a stable”.

“The herring-hawker’s cry” adds some local colour but its function is more significant than that. In tune with the various “voices” the speaker encounters in his new environment – be that in “Single to Belfast”, in “Arrival” or in this very poem – the herring-hawker’s utterance is one that does not prompt a conversation. Unless the speaker wants to purchase fish, there is no need to start a dialogue; no need to engage with the foreign culture. It is thus the speaker’s choice to speak; one that seems to hold considerably less pressure than the nervous decision not to speak to his fellow travellers in “Autobiography at an Air-Station”. It is paradoxically this freedom of choice that sets the signs *pro* Ireland: it proves the speaker “separate, not unworkable”. Repeatedly, this instance is reminiscent of the negatives “to unknown from lost” in “Single to Belfast”. In Ireland, the speaker might not be part of the community, but there is still a faint possibility for that. On the other hand, his original community has already dismissed him as “unworkable”.

“Living in England has no such excuse”. In his original community, in his anthropological place complete with history and relations there are no excuses not to interact without appearing peculiar. The native in his native country is naturally required to be an active part of the native community: “These are my customs and establishments/It would be much more serious to refuse.”

“Here no elsewhere underwrites my existence.” The deliberate imprecision of the

local adverb “here” emphasizes the speaker’s existence between two communities. The alert reader, however, will notice that it is England, the speaker’s alleged ‘home’, where “no elsewhere underwrites my existence”. While in Ireland, there is the refuge of strangeness, of being able to say “I don’t belong here” in order to keep to oneself; England as the native country lacks this kind of refuge. The status of strangeness, of existing on the fringes, in “The Importance of Elsewhere” is underlined by the absence of the first person singular pronoun “I”. The speaker merely uses possessive pronouns and conjugated forms of the first person singular pronoun as if he was deliberately melting into the Irish shadows. England, as his native country, would have insisted on the first person singular.

There are two more significant points to make in regard to “The Importance of Elsewhere”. The last line of the poem “Here no elsewhere underwrites my existence” eerily corresponds to the central line in Larkin’s pastoral “Here”, written six years later: “Here is unfenced existence.” Whereas the place denoted “here” in the poem of the same name corresponds to the ultimate bliss of non-place, the last line in “The Importance of Elsewhere” only implies non-place. While “Here” in “The Importance of Elsewhere” is England, it also implies England as uncomfortable anthropological place in Augé’s sense.

Ireland thus becomes non-place; a place that becomes attractive and welcoming because the speaker’s ties and relations, his history, is *elsewhere*. The speaker in “The Importance of Elsewhere” is literally not on his home-turf in Ireland and relieved by it; something a poet like Heaney, the devoted “turf-cutter”¹⁵⁰ would hardly be able to embrace. “The Importance of Elsewhere” is thus far from being an English or Irish poem; it is a poem about ‘home’ and ‘elsewhere’; about ‘place’ and ‘non-place’. In

¹⁵⁰ James Booth, “The Turf-Cutter And The Nine-to-Five Man: Heaney, Larkin, And ‘The Spiritual Intellect’s Great Work’” in: *Twentieth Century Literature*, 43:4, Winter 1997, pp. 369-393

“Here” and “The Importance of Elsewhere”, Larkin adds to Augé’s non-places something more than just train compartments, airports, supermarkets and hotels (all of which also appear in Larkin’s work). Whereas Augé sketches purpose-built places of transit that remain more or less anonymous, “Here” and “The Importance of Elsewhere” erect emotional non-places of the mind.

Cities such as Hull and Belfast certainly count as anthropological places for their history. However, in Larkin, they become blissful non-places because the speaker – most notably in “Here” and “The Importance of Elsewhere” – remains separate. Should the speaker become part of it non-place would become stifling anthropological place. The positive non-place in “Here” and “The Importance of Elsewhere” as a rare instance in Larkin’s poetry is a powerful antidote to the speakers’ anxiety towards a potentially hostile (native) community in poems like “The Building”, “Autobiography at an Air-Station” or even “Single to Belfast”. The non-place of the mind is abstracted from specific location and so universally accessible.

Larkin’s technique here is very similar to “Here” which sketches details of Hull but refuses to attach the poem to one specifically named city. Larkin’s Belfast is not the sectarian “Belfast” of MacNeice with its noisy “banging of Orange drums”¹⁵¹ constantly in the background. Edna Longley detects “significant similarities between Larkin and Mahon”.¹⁵² Indeed, Derek Mahon’s Belfast with “hill[s]/At the top of every street”¹⁵³ (“Spring In Belfast”) appears as very similar to Larkin’s, albeit only at first glance. In “Afterlives II” Mahon’s speaker arrives in Belfast by boat much like the speakers in Larkin’s “Single to Belfast” and “Arrival”. But while Larkin’s speakers are very much

¹⁵¹ Louis MacNeice, *Selected Poems*, Michael Longley (ed.), Faber and Faber Ltd., London, 1988, p. 15; all poems by MacNeice quoted in this thesis are collected in this volume.

¹⁵² Edna Longley, “Looking Back from the Yellow Book” in: Elmer Kennedy-Andrews (ed.), *The Poetry of Derek Mahon*, Colin Smythe Limited, Buckingham, 2002, p. 29

¹⁵³ Derek Mahon, *Collected Poems*, Peter Fallon (ed.), The Gallery Press, Loughcrew, 2000, p. 13; all poems by Mahon quoted in this thesis are collected in this volume.

aware of entering strange territory, Mahon's speaker in "Afterlives II" can casually state that he is "going home by sea/For the first time in years".¹⁵⁴ Larkin's speakers are new to the city and find a welcome in indifference; Mahon's speaker is alienated by what he thought was his beloved hometown, "a city so changed/By five years of war/I scarcely recognize/The places I grew up in". The attitude in Larkin and Mahon might seem similar, a sort of mild bewilderment, but the background to the emotions is very different. Larkin's speaker is a stranger in a strange land; Mahon's speaker is a native who finds himself estranged from his native country upon his return. His easy assertion of "home" in the first line of "Afterlives II" is deconstructed towards the end of the poem. Struck by the unfamiliarity of once-familiar places the speaker has to admit: "Perhaps if I'd stayed behind/And lived it bomb by bomb/I might have grown up at last/And learnt what is meant by home." Larkin's speaker in "The Importance of Elsewhere" and Mahon's speaker in "Afterlives II" to a certain extent share their feeling of homelessness, but while Larkin's speaker is nurtured by the freedom this allows him, Mahon's speaker is full of bitter, almost ironic regret. In Mahon, Belfast is explicitly mentioned: "the hills are still the same/Grey-blue above Belfast." But here it is not only place, it is anthropological, historical place. Mahon's speaker might remain on a strictly individual level, but behind Belfast as the speaker's hometown looms the "city so changed/By [...] war" and destroyed "bomb by bomb". The Troubles and the particular political situation in Northern Ireland create a clear backdrop to the speaker's alienation.

Mahon engages with historico-political implications which Larkin dodges. Larkin's "The March Past" – also part of Whalen's "Irish cluster" – gives no hint of the "burgeoning Orange sympathies"¹⁵⁵ that Motion would like to detect. There is nothing of the "rock-solid sense of national glory" that Tom Paulin would attribute to the poem

¹⁵⁴ Mahon 2000, p. 59

¹⁵⁵ Motion 1993, p. 210

calling Larkin (and Spenser) “English Protestant Royalists whose nationalism was intensified by their experience of Ireland.”¹⁵⁶

More accurately, the experience of the march in “The March Past”¹⁵⁷ allows for a brief identification with the “credulous, prettily-coloured crowd”: “larger than *we* reckoned,/Into a consequence of thirty seconds” [emphasis mine] underlined by the first person plural pronoun - one of only two personal pronouns in the poem’s eight stanzas. While MacNeice hears “Orange drums” in “Belfast” and “drummers/Are granted passage through the nodding crowd”¹⁵⁸ in Heaney’s “Orange Drums, Tyrone, 1966”, Larkin speaks of “pure marchings” – without political or religious ballast and concludes that the casual witness tends to be mesmerized “when *any* march goes by” [emphasis mine]. In the same way as “The March Past” is hardly locally fixed apart from Larkin’s biography, “The Importance of Elsewhere” would function just as well if the speaker was “Lonely in Poland” and “Living in Denmark”. It is here that Whalen’s point becomes most significant: Larkin’s “best poems written in Ireland were not necessarily about Ireland at all.”¹⁵⁹ Mahon’s “Afterlives” – albeit on a rather personal level – is ultimately about Ireland. This is because Mahon refers to one of these instances that are part of a collective history: The Troubles as historical fact are firmly linked to Ireland and can hardly be abstracted from their specific national context.

Robin Skelton in the introduction to his *Six Irish Poets* from 1962 underlines the difference between English and Irish poets:

Irish poetry can still base itself firmly upon what might be described as ‘natural resources’. It is interesting because in England there appear very few poets indeed with this kind of awareness of their nationality, this sense of belonging,

¹⁵⁶ Tom Paulin, “Into the Heart of Englishness“ in: Regan 1992, p. 161

¹⁵⁷ The poem appears as “March Past” in *The Complete Poems*, Burnett 2012

¹⁵⁸ Seamus Heaney, *Opened Ground Selected Poems 1966-1996*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1999, p. 131

¹⁵⁹ Whalen 1996

however rebelliously, to a social or ethnic group.¹⁶⁰

In “The Importance of Elsewhere” the poet is aware of his native community, but not smugly and unreflectively in touch with its “customs and establishments”. Neither is he in touch with the “natural resources” of the Irish community. Larkin withstands “that Irish impulse to name and fix”.¹⁶¹ As a consequence, his speakers appear as universal and *here* while Heaney’s speakers, for example, are very much always *there*. They are “Digging”, “Blackberry-Picking”, collecting “Fodder” in “Anahorish”, “Toome”, “Broagh” or “Mossbawn”, in “The Barn” or “The Forge”, constantly literally connected to the “home-turf” that Larkin’s speakers either consciously evade or find themselves unable to track down.

It is no surprise then, that Heaney misreads – whether deliberately or not - “The Importance of Elsewhere”. Whalen reads “The Importance of Elsewhere” not only as a retrospective appreciation of Larkin’s “experience in Ireland” but also as “a poem of cultural gratitude”¹⁶² towards Ireland. Heaney’s reading goes directly against this. In his “Englands Of The Mind”, Heaney reads the “The Importance Of Elsewhere” as merely underlining Larkin’s Englishness; the speaker in the poem

gave thanks, by implication, for the nurture that he receives by living among his own. The speech, the customs, the institutions of England are, in the words of another poet, domiciled in Ireland, ‘wife to his creating thought’.¹⁶³

It has already been noted by more than one critic that Heaney misreads “The Importance Of Elsewhere” drastically. As we have seen in the course of the argument “The Importance Of Elsewhere” is neither a poem of cultural gratitude towards Ireland as Whalen reads it nor does its speaker give thanks for the reassuring nature of the

¹⁶⁰ Quoted in: Stan Smith, *Irish Poetry and the Construction of Modern Identity: Ireland Between Fantasy and History*, Irish Academic Press, Dublin, 2005, p. 111

¹⁶¹ Smith 2005, p. 149

¹⁶² Whalen 1996

¹⁶³ Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978*, Faber And Faber Ltd., London, 1980, p. 167/8

“customs and establishments” of England in the way Heaney interprets the poem.

Strikingly, Heaney senses Englishness where there is none in the same way that he senses Irishness where there is no pronounced Irishness. In his “The Sense of Place” Heaney traces the long-standing Irish tradition of preoccupation with place and emphasizes that it is only the Irish locals that can write succinctly about Irish place: as mere tourists in Ireland “We will have little felt knowledge of the place, little enough of a sense of wonder or a sense of tradition.”¹⁶⁴ It is exactly this lack of sense of tradition that appeals to the speaker in “The Importance of Elsewhere”. As a mere ‘tourist’ the speaker can relish the freedom of non-place, partaking only in the customs and establishments of the community if he feels like it. Instead of clinging to roots, the speaker can relax in “wide-branched indifference”. Heaney connects “knowledge of place” and “sense of tradition” with Patrick Kavanagh’s Irish rootedness which “gave the majority of the Irish people [...] an image of themselves that nourished their sense of themselves.” At the same time, Heaney risks paradoxes when he records that Kavanagh “abjured any national purpose, any belief in Ireland as ‘a spiritual entity’”. The “poet whom we recognize as being the voice of a communal life had a fiercely individual sense of himself.”¹⁶⁵ This “fiercely individual sense of himself” sounds more like Larkin than Kavanagh. Indeed, Kavanagh’s own notion of the poet almost sounds Larkinesque: “A poet is never one of the people. He is detached, remote, and the life of small-time dances and talk about football would not be for him. He might take part but he could not belong.”¹⁶⁶ Heaney quotes Kavanagh with the following: “Parochialism is universal; it deals with the fundamentals.”¹⁶⁷ As such, the parochial cannot deal with narrow cultural nationality.

¹⁶⁴ Heaney 1980, p. 136

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 137/8

¹⁶⁶ Patrick Kavanagh, *Collected Prose*, Brian & O’Keeffe, London, 1973, p. 15

¹⁶⁷ Quoted in: Heaney 1980, p. 139

Heaney attempts to find a balance between Kavanagh the detached, non-communal poet and Kavanagh the poet of the Irish people. Heaney finds in Kavanagh “the observant eye, patient ear and celebratory tone” and “the subject they would share – vignettes from routines on the small farms of Ulster”¹⁶⁸ and so places him in a very Irish context; he finds it less easy to relate to the side to Kavanagh’s poetry that allies him with Larkin.

Kavanagh’s “My Room” with its deliberate stock-taking of a life strikingly resembles Larkin’s “Poetry of Departures”. Devoid of place-names that would indicate an actual location, both “My Room” and “Poetry of Departures” manage to convey a powerful feeling of personal, not national, identity – as opposed to Heaney’s evaluation.

Kavanagh’s speaker takes stock: his room is not big and the bed as its only furniture serves many functions at once. It is his “dining table”, “his writing desk” and his “couch”.¹⁶⁹ At first the enumeration of these items of furniture conveys a feeling of contentment – the speaker has everything he needs: a dining table to eat at, a writing desk to compose poetry at and a couch to recline in – but this idea turns around as soon as the reader realises that it is only the bed that serves all these functions; there is simply nothing else in the room.

The repetition of the possessive pronoun “my” in the title “my room”, in the first stanza “my head”, in the third stanza “my bed” and in the final three lines again “my room” indicates the speaker’s identification with the situation. By only looking at the first and third stanza the reader could easily feel that this was a situation of contentment.

The second stanza, however, underlines this impression only at first glance. The entire stanza deals with “five holy pictures”, the only items of furniture the room contains next to the bed. If one takes the pictures of “The Virgin and Child”, “St Anthony of Padua”,

¹⁶⁸ Dillon Johnston, , *Irish Poetry After Joyce*, Syracuse University Press Johnston, 1997, p. 139

¹⁶⁹ Patrick Kavanagh, *Collected Poems*, Antoinette Quinn (ed.), Penguin Books Ltd., 2005, p. 10

“St Patrick our own”, of “Leo XIII” and “the Little Flower” at face value one might easily be fooled into believing that the speaker in “My Room” is piously Catholic and thus totally at home in his surroundings. The fact, however, that the “five holy pictures” in the room are not introduced by the possessive pronoun “my” in the same way that all other possessions in the poem are, speaks volumes. The pictures are obviously not the speaker’s. The overly obvious emphasis on the Irish saints betrays irony on the part of Kavanagh’s speaker who accepts the Irish stage props as part of his room but exaggerates their significance in such a way as to render the alleged Irishness in invisible inverted commas. Seen from this perspective the pseudo-communal identification in “St Patrick our own” is exposed as wry irony and as a long forgotten echo of Catholic indoctrination. This is especially valid if one takes into account that “The Great Hunger”, the poem that made Kavanagh famous, is about the spiritual starvation in the face of naive Irish Catholicism.

Thus, Kavanagh cleverly creates a fake atmosphere of contentment that is exposed as fake only when it becomes clear that “My room is a musty attic”. This final negative observation serves as a kind of frame together with the first stanza: the only rhyme in the poem “roof – reproof” in the first stanza puts an emphasis on “reproof” and thus cunningly introduces the underlying negative evaluation of the superficially positive situation into the poem. There is literally no room for his head: “My head feels the reproof”.

The final two lines “But its little window/Lets in the stars” can thus only be read as heavily sarcastic and – on yet another level – as a swipe against the myth-making of the Celtic Twilight. Even if there is a connection to the outside and the stars, the speaker is still contained in his musty, empty, small attic room (“Such attics cleared of me! Such absences!” from Larkin’s “Absences” springs to mind) and has only a “little window”

as an instrument of connection to the outside world. There is – significantly – no door that would encourage leaving the room. Kavanagh leaves behind the outside world, the parochial, the “vignettes of rural life” and indeed establishes a “fiercely individual sense of himself” in “My Room”. The image of the attic room goes directly against the grain of Heaney’s obsession with the ground and soil of Irish history and is simultaneously less mystic and decidedly less image-laden than Yeats’ tower. The reader homes in on the individual, not on the individual’s region, nor on the individual’s nationality. Kavanagh’s “My Room” is a musty attic, not a home, despite the Irish Catholic stage props. The room is miles apart from any community.

Larkin’s speaker in “Poetry of Departures” adopts an extreme version of the same stance. Larkin’s speaker is more explicit: “We all hate home/And having to be there” and “I detest my room”. The possessive pronoun “my” in this case is even more obviously negative than Kavanagh’s use of the same pronoun. Kavanagh’s speaker talks about “my bed” and the multiple uses of it convey a comic sense of failure, whereas Larkin’s speaker has “the good bed” as if he was merely reproducing someone else’s opinion. The “good bed” and the “good books” with the repetition of the blandest positive adjective possible, highlight a certain kind of ennui in “Poetry of Departures”. The speakers in both poems take stock and none of them identifies with what he sees. Kavanagh’s speaker notes the five holy pictures that are not his; Larkin’s speaker sneers at the “specially-chosen junk” in his room. Indeed, Kavanagh’s five holy pictures sound like the epitome of Larkin’s “specially-chosen junk”. However, it needs to be noted that the five pictures in Kavanagh are culturally specific; Larkin’s “the good books” and “the good bed”, much like “the pictures and the cutlery./The music in the piano stool. That vase” in “Home is so Sad” remain culturally universal.

Whereas Kavanagh’s speaker ironically acknowledges the “little window” that “lets in

the stars”, Larkin’s speaker rejects “the good bed” and “the good books” which are outward signs of “my life, in perfect order” and envies the person who “*walked out on the whole crowd*”, but cannot follow their example as it would be “so artificial” and “a deliberate step backwards”. Metaphorically speaking, Larkin’s speaker cannot find the door in the same way that Kavanagh’s speaker can only see a tiny window. Kavanagh’s speaker tries to concentrate on the non-human outside, the stars. Larkin’s speaker imagines an almost pastoral outside, an away-from-it-all, where he swaggers “the nut-strewn roads” with yet another sneer – with the same irony that Kavanagh’s speaker employs when he praises his little window.

James Booth elaborates on how “the four neat rooms of the stanzas” in “Poetry of Departures” “are wrecked from within by a spirit of comic chaos.”¹⁷⁰ The same is true for Kavanagh’s poem, albeit his chaos is somewhat tamer, less drastic. Significantly, Larkin’s speaker does not just *hate* home, he *detests* his room. He thus rejects the generally positive connotations of home as anthropological place and in favour of the all too concrete concept of *a* room. Kavanagh’s speaker does not even mention “home”.

The concept of “home” and “rooms” appears repeatedly in Larkin’s poetry. All his speakers take stock in the way that Kavanagh’s speaker takes stock of his “musty attic”. Mr Bleaney calls a “fusty bed” his own and one can easily imagine that Kavanagh’s sarcastic “slumber palace” is just the same. Mr Bleaney looks out of a window that “shows a strip of building land” and stands and watches “the frigid wind/Tousling the clouds” – Kavanagh’s speaker seems to do exactly the same.

Is it not intriguing that the “man who has most deeply influenced contemporary Irish poetry”¹⁷¹ and one of the “hoarders and shorers of [...] the real England”¹⁷² should write

¹⁷⁰ Booth 2005, p. 158

¹⁷¹ Quoted in: Johnston 1997, p. 33

¹⁷² Heaney 1980, p. 150

such similar poetry? I am not trying to establish that Kavanagh was an influence on Larkin. I am merely suggesting that poetry has an immensely extended scope if one frees it from the petty restrictions of the poet's native community. Kavanagh's "My Room" would make sense, even if the poet himself was not Irish. Larkin's "Poetry Of Departures" does still make sense if one forgets for a moment that Larkin is English. Kavanagh claims the parochial as universal. His poem underlines that in the end it is always fiercely asserted individuality in the face of a potentially threatening community that is most universal.

Larkin's "Dublinesque" is slightly more ambiguous in the context of Larkin's Irish experience. Written in 1970, well after his time in Belfast, the poem's title seems to pick up exactly the "Irish impulse to name and fix"¹⁷³ that Larkin so successfully evades with his other 'Irish' poems. Whereas an 'Irish' poet like Mahon casually names and fixes in poems like "Glengormley", "Daytrip to Donegal", "A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford" or "The Chinese Restaurant in Portrush", Larkin usually steers clear of place-names in the titles to his poems. "Sunny Prestatyn" might appear as an exemption, but one should note that the speaker in the poem is elsewhere contemplating the poster advertising the holiday resort. Typically, the speaker is not *there*.

"Dublinesque", then, in its atypical geographical exactness, differs profoundly from the geographical vagueness of Larkin's other 'Irish' poems. Larkin wrote to Maeve Brennan in 1969 that "Dublinesque" came to him in "a dream"¹⁷⁴ and it retains much of the dream-like quality - as if recorded with a soft-focus lens. The speaker in the poem adopts the stance that Heaney so harshly criticizes: the stance of the tourist, who as opposed to the Irish native has no direct emotional connection to the place. The speaker in "Dublinesque" may have "little felt knowledge of the place" as he resorts to touristy

¹⁷³ Stan Smith 2005, p. 149

¹⁷⁴ Motion 1993, p. 395

details which James Booth classified as “close to stereotype”¹⁷⁵ - “Down stucco sidestreets,/Where light is pewter/And afternoon mist/Brings on lights in shops/Above race-guides and rosaries” - but there is - especially in the Larkinesque context - a certain sense of wonder by encountering a funeral among the almost Romantic impressions of the tourist. Booth further notes that “Dublinesque” is mediated through Joyce’s “Dubliners” but whereas Joyce’s atmosphere is permeated by a sense of failure and an underlying political and social strain as the characters attempt to escape their Irish dilemma, Larkin’s poem remains curiously tranquil and carefree.

This dream-like tranquillity is even more atypical of Larkin in that the subject of the poem is a funeral. Larkin could have made much of the contrast between the touristy outlook and the sudden re-emergence of human transience, but he chooses not to. Instead, the soft-focus lens establishes a sort of harmony; the funeral becomes almost romantic in Dublin’s pewter light. If “Dublinesque” was really conceived in a dream then it stands in marked contrast to Larkin’s much earlier poem “Träumerei”. Where “Träumerei” with its German title hints at something light and carefree, the poem itself is sinister in its nightmarish quality. As part of a rushing crowd the speaker is inevitably swept away towards impending death but wakes breathlessly before “D-E-A-T-H” is fully spelt out on the high walls that are forever closing in on the crowd. “Dublinesque” – despite its focus on a funeral – has nothing of this nightmarish quality.

Instead of a solitary threat of death, Larkin’s speaker encounters a community that holds the balance between “great friendliness” and “great sadness”. “Sadness” in the face of death is more often than not translated as nameless dread, terror and emptiness in Larkin. Here, however, the funeral is not a threat but a demonstration of a community, albeit one that belongs to the fringes of society:

¹⁷⁵ Booth 2005, p. 140

A troop of streetwalkers
In wide flowered hats,
Leg-of-mutton sleeves,
And ankle-length dresses.

The “flowered hats” are far removed from a regular funeral procession dressed in black and are a far cry from the “parodies of fashion” in “The Whitsun Weddings”. Indeed, in “Dublinesque” “There is an air of great friendliness” that seems also to encompass the speaker. There is no bitterness here. The tourist-speaker seems to step back to let the funeral procession pass which is underlined by the distinct lack of a first person singular pronoun in the entire poem. The focus lies on the almost outlandish quality of the procession he witnesses: the third person plural pronoun “they” (“they were honouring”, “they were fond of”, “they wend away”) appears three times. The speaker is clearly not part of the group as is emphasized by the conjunctive construction “As if they were honouring” and the almost disembodied “(Someone claps time)” and “A voice is heard singing”. It is almost as though the procession has already disappeared around the corner leaving the speaker longingly straining his ears to stay in touch with the “great friendliness” that goes hand in hand with the “great sadness”. This friendliness and sadness coupled with the singing and the dancing (“some caper a few steps/Skirts held skillfully”) is diametrically opposed to the sheer dread in the face of death that is prevalent in most of Larkin’s poems dealing with the subject.

The stance of the detached speaker in “Dublinesque”, however, remains familiarly Larkinesque. More so than in “Arrivals” or “The Importance of Elsewhere” does the speaker adopt the role of the detached tourist. But whereas the speakers in the other ‘Irish’ poems consciously reflect on their part in their community, in “Dublinesque” there is no pressure to connect; the speaker is simply taken in by the harmony of the image that presents itself. For once, the speaker encounters a community that is

confident of its own values.

The last stanza makes use of yet another quasi-anaphora as we have seen in “Single to Belfast”: “And of great.../As they wend.../A voice.../Of Kitty.../As if.../All love...” underlining the harmony of the procession. The fourth line “Of Kitty, or Katy” is not in tune with the rest of the anaphora. It is at this instance that death becomes personified and invested with a kind of longing: “As if the name meant once/All love, all beauty.” The speaker is touched by the emotions of the funeral procession, maybe even more so because they are transported by music. The poem’s single eye-rhyme “Katy – beauty” brings home the truth: “Dublinesque” is not about impersonal death; it is about love and beauty, not as a universal concept but in a particular context whose emotion is so personal as to be universal.

“Dublinesque” sees Larkin negotiate “that Irish impulse to name and fix”. The suffix “-esque” remains conveniently vague; this is not the Birmingham of MacNeice nor the Glanmore of Heaney. The title of the poem along with the commonly Irish name “Kitty” and the Celtic Romanticism of “pewter light” hint at an Irish context, but it is once more a Dublin of the mind, an atmosphere, more than a geographically fixed place. The speaker’s little radius is nothing compared to Leopold Bloom’s elaborate tour through Dublin. The poem strikes a curious balance between anthropological place and blissful non-place. It thus disqualifies Heaney’s sense of place: the speaker might have little knowledge of the place, but that does not mean he cannot feel (what is “felt knowledge” anyways?). The tourist-speaker in “Dublinesque” retains “a sense of wonder” (the curious, soft-edged tranquillity of the funeral procession) along with a certain “sense of tradition” (the singing and dancing at a funeral) and thus – in Heaney’s sense – strikes a balance between the tourist and the native.

Louis MacNeice’s “Dublin” not only makes an appearance in the Larkin-edited

Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse, it is explicitly praised by Larkin in one of his letters to Monica Jones. Impressed “by the liveliness and the variety” of Auden’s collected poems, Larkin relates to Monica how he consequently “happened on a poem called *Dublin* by MacNeice&that also depressed me by its extraordinary talent.”¹⁷⁶ MacNeice’s poem goes one step further than Larkin’s “Dublinesque”. Despite MacNeice’s reputation as a “tourist in his own country”¹⁷⁷ his poem retains a certain sense of “felt knowledge” of the place and gives in to the “Irish impulse to name and fix”. MacNeice names historical figures with “O’Connell, Grattan, Moore”¹⁷⁸, fixes the town of “grey brick upon brick” as close to the “Wicklow hills” and explicitly juxtaposes “the Irish to the Anglo-Irish”.

The apparent harmony and the speaker’s identification with the place in the first stanza with its “swans”, “the balustraded stream” and the “porter running from the taps/With a head of yellow cream” crumbles towards the end of the stanza: “And Nelson on his pillar/Watching his world collapse.” If the first stanza hinted at a feeling of homeliness then the second stanza sees the speaker distance himself from the very town he just painted in the warmest colours with certain kind of defiance:

This never was my town,
I was not born or bred
Nor schooled here and she will not
Have me alive or dead

This defiance and studied distance is reminiscent of Larkin’s speaker’s pose in “The Importance of Elsewhere”. Neither tourist nor native, the speaker can step back from what belonging to the community would entail and be confident on his own. But

¹⁷⁶ Philip Larkin, *Letters to Monica*, Anthony Thwaite (ed.), Faber and Faber Limited, London, 2010, p. 14

¹⁷⁷ Derek Mahon, “MacNeice in Ireland and England“ 1974, in: Derek Mahon, *Journalism Selected Prose 1970-1995*, Terence Brown (ed.), The Gallery Press, Loughcrew, 1996, p. 25

¹⁷⁸ *The Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse*, Philip Larkin (ed.), Oxford University Press, 1973, p. 399

whereas Larkin's speaker in "The Importance of Elsewhere" focuses not so much on the new city but on the new community he encounters, MacNeice's speaker, though "not born or bred/Nor schooled here" (much like Larkin in Hull), cannot evade the urban fascination with the city itself: "But yet she holds my mind". The cluster of three anaphoras in that very stanza

*With her seedy elegance,
With her gentle veils of rain
And all her ghosts that walk
And all that hide behind
Her Georgian facades -
The catcalls and the pain,
The glamour of her squalor,
The bravado of her talk. [emphases mine]*

nonetheless underlines the appraisal of the city as anthropological place in Augé's sense and perhaps Dublin's "timeless receptivity in which native and alien were absorbed in the city's own being."¹⁷⁹ Despite the Irish references like "porter running from the taps/With a head of yellow cream", "The lights jig in the river" and "Like barley-sugar on the water" MacNeice's speaker remains consciously neutral. Dublin "is not an Irish town/And she is not English". He refers to the Irish and the Anglo-Irish, even to the killer who "is close one moment/To the man he kills", but maintains a neutral stance by shifting the particular immediately to the abstract and universal "Or as the moment itself/Is close to the next moment." This impression is emphasized by the lack of a first person singular pronoun in the entire poem. The "tourist in his own country" steps back from the streets of Dublin to a higher vantage point that takes in the hills of Wicklow but allows him to still see the "balustraded stream" and the "brick upon grey brick". Unlike Heaney, MacNeice's speaker can look back into history to see Dublin as "Fort of the Dane,/Garrison of the Saxon,/Augustan capital/Of a Gaelic nation" without the

¹⁷⁹ Terence Brown, "Dublin in Twentieth Century Writing: Metaphor and Subject", in: *Irish University Review*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (Spring, 1978), p. 13

obsessive compulsion to create a specifically Irish identity from it.

MacNeice merely underlines Dublin's capacity of "Appropriating all/The alien brought"; the city's "self-absorbing imperviousness to change"¹⁸⁰, not the citizen's struggle to create a cultural identity from "every layer" that "Seems camped on before" as in Heaney's "Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces".¹⁸¹ For Heaney, "the literal and metaphorical ground of Ireland groans under a weight of accumulated history"¹⁸²; Heaney's "Viking Dublin" with its trial pieces accumulates history as identity, history as community. That is why Heaney's speaker can refer casually to the first person plural pronoun in part III of "Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces": "And now we can reach in/for shards of the vertebrae". He just as casually refers to the first person singular pronoun with "I follow into the mud/I am Hamlet the Dane". In Heaney, identity is unearthed, not questioned; community is recalled, not negotiated. Dublin, pronounced "spined and plosive" as the keel of the Norse longship stuck in the banks of the Liffey, becomes invested with history, identity and relations.

The [Irish] nation is seen as a rich complex compost of traditions, influences, movements, historic events received into the national being and the history of Dublin is part of that process whilst her own history exhibits the process at work.¹⁸³

What Brown summarizes here is Heaney's creation and assertion of Ireland as anthropological place, a place where both MacNeice and Larkin cannot and will not follow.

Whereas Larkin creates a personal, dream-like Dublin of the mind that neither names

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 13

¹⁸¹ Seamus Heaney, *Opened Ground Selected Poems 1966-1996*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1999, pp. 100 ff.

¹⁸² Scott Brewster, "Residual Poetry: Heaney, Mahon and Hedgehog History", in: *Irish University Review*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (Spring-Summer, 1998), p. 56

¹⁸³ Brown 1978, p. 14

nor fixes nor “historicizes geography”¹⁸⁴, MacNeice is aware of political dimensions but refuses to take sides in the Irish vs. Anglo-Irish debate. His speaker does not engage with any kind of community or professes a specific cultural identity which is expressed by the curious lack of people in his poem whose central personal pronoun refers to “she” – the city. The embracing parallelism of the first line “grey brick upon brick” and the very last line “And brick upon grey brick” of the poem re-enforces the impression of MacNeice’s speaker engaging with the city, not its people – an impression Larkin’s “Dublinesque” opposes. MacNeice creates a quasi-anthropological place in an urban, man-made space but does not encounter a community; Larkin creates a (n Irish) place of the mind that is the setting of a functional, if romanticized community.

The speakers in both poems are tourists. However, MacNeice’s speaker is a tourist in a more literal sense, whereas Larkin’s tourist remains less concerned with the sights he could actually encounter “Down stucco side streets”. MacNeice is a tourist in his own country investing Dublin with historical facts, not with personal relations, and thus creating a curious mixture of anthropological place and non-place. Larkin invests Dublin with community, not with identity, creating a curiously grounded non-place with an altogether different, more personal texture.

In “Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces” Heaney establishes the anthropological place in Augé’s sense as the *non plus ultra*. His criticism fails to see that anthropological place is not necessarily the *status quo* to which poets aspire. Heaney will attest to both Larkin and MacNeice “little felt knowledge of the place”, but Mahon makes a valuable point that is originally about MacNeice, but works very well in the Larkin context:

¹⁸⁴ I have borrowed this expression from Declan Kibert who states in his “Contemporary Irish Writing” that Heaney’s solution to the rift between Gaelic and Anglo-Irish traditions “is to historicize geography”, in: *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing Vol. III*, Seamus Deane (ed.), Field Day Publications, Dublin, 1991, p. 1315

'A tourist in his own country', it has been said, with the implication that this is somehow discreditable, but of what sensitive person is the same not true? The phrase might stand, indeed, as epitaph for modern man, beside Camus' 'He made love and read the newspapers'.¹⁸⁵

It might be the native, engrossed in his own identity, contended with unearthing anthropological place who misses things as his spade is "always striking inward and downward."¹⁸⁶ The tourist-y stance Larkin's speaker takes in "Dublinesque" is the stance taken in "Arrival" and "The Importance of Elsewhere" tinged with a certain nostalgia.

Something altogether different is at work in Mahon's "Going Home" that is replaced by a different poem with the same title in his *Collected Poems*. The version in *Poems 1962-1978* is dedicated to the Scottish poet Douglas Dunn, Larkin's erstwhile protégé in Hull and friend of Mahon's - the version in the *Collected Poems* is dedicated to John Hewitt. It is striking that Larkin should write such a great number of poems about his arrival in the new city, while there is not one poem about his return to England on taking up the post as librarian at the University of Hull. Mahon seems to have noted the fact, too, and adopts an almost Larkinesque pose and tone in "Going Home" which is paradoxically set not in Mahon's hometown, but in Dunn's - and Larkin's at the time: Hull. If there is a poem in Larkin's *oeuvre* that could be called "Going Home", then "The Importance of Elsewhere" would surely and paradoxically qualify. Nowhere else in Larkin - except for maybe in "Here" - is the blissful non-place more impressively established. Significantly, Larkin's speakers hardly ever return; they leave. In "The Whitsun Weddings", the speaker is "late getting away", in "Poetry of Departures" someone "*chucked up everything/And just cleared off*" and the academic in "Naturally..." cannot wait until the Comet "would snatch me from" the dark British

¹⁸⁵ Mahon 1996, p. 25

¹⁸⁶ Kiberd, *Field Day Anthology III*, 1991, p. 1315

autumn day. The only poem that gives the impression of someone returning is “Here”, but even here the speaker never explicitly alights the train and sneakily dodges all implications of “coming home” and returning to a beloved city.

“Home” is hardly ever blissful in Larkin: “We all hate home/ And having to be there” from “Poetry of Departures” and “(If home existed)” from “Friday Night in the Royal Station Hotel” speak volumes in this context. In Mahon’s “Going Home”, the River Humber turns into a kind of Styx that dead souls have to cross, or a Lethe from which the dead will have to drink in order to forget their earthly existence. The speaker in the poem refers to “we” in the first person plural throughout the poem and thus establishes a somewhat eerie community of spirits: “Why we died/Remains a mystery”; “we are/Spirits here”.¹⁸⁷ Like Larkin who ponders on what will survive of us, the speaker in Mahon’s “Going Home” wonders what will be left of the spirits – “a misleading fraction [of “recipes, nursery rhymes/And archaic ailments”]/Will survive on file”; “only an unrepresentative sample/Will persist on tape”. The speaking spirits seem to hover over the Humber in the “Dawn mist which clings/All afternoon/To the south bank of the Humber”, albeit on the “south bank” – across from the city of Hull. While the spirits watch other spirits “come over/Twice daily from Hull/Disguised as shift workers” until they “vanish for ever”, the reader is left to wonder why the spirit-speaker does not disappear along with them, “home/To the blank Elysium”. Elysium, however, remains blank, due to the spirits’ “Eschewal of metaphysics”.

This once more rings decidedly Larkinesque so that the entire poem appears like a mannered jibe against the unavailability of transcendence and of home, indeed of anthropological place, in Larkin. However, in Larkin there is little “residual poetry of/Leavetaking and homecoming”. Larkin’s speakers might take their leave, but they

¹⁸⁷ Derek Mahon, *Poems 1962-1978*, Oxford University Press, 1978, p. 61

never come home. This is why the spirit-speaker in Mahon's "Going Home" can refer to a "last/Homecoming, the end/Of the rainbow". What awaits the spirits without metaphysical beliefs is a wry, desolate scene coming back into Hull: "And the pubs are shut./There are no/Buses till morning." What Mahon does here is create the kind of homecoming one would have attributed to Larkin in the first place. "The Importance of Elsewhere" – especially in direct comparison to Mahon's "Going Home" – is typical of Larkin in its establishment of blissful non-place. Mahon creates a non-place that is similar to Larkin's Dublin of the mind in "Dublinesque". Mahon's Hull and Humber are mentioned explicitly, but do little more than underline the implicit Larkin reference. Mahon's "to propitiate silence" rings in tune with Larkin's "weak, propitiatory flowers" at the end of "The Building". The wry "And the pubs are shut." is also reminiscent of Larkin – perhaps a clever play with Larkin's "and the pubs/Wide open all day" in "MCMXIV". The spirit world might make use of a communal "we", but the scene in Mahon's "Going Home" is more desolate and empty than any of Larkin's scenes.

Mahon counters this Larkinesque wryness with Roman mythology and Heaney-esque archeology. Heaney refers to Norse invaders in "Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces". "Foundered legionaries" and "the blank Elysium" in Mahon refer to the Roman history in the East Riding around Hull, but the evocation of the Humber as a version of Styx or Lethe infuses Roman references with Greek mythology and is less coherent than Heaney's Norse "longship" and "long sword". In "Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces" "antler combs, bone pins/coins and scale-pans" are unearthed from the ground; Mahon preserves "recipes, nursery rhymes/and archaic ailments" – "on tape". When in Heaney "the longship's keel/struck fast in the uvular/slip of the bank", in Mahon's riverbank "A sunken barge rots/In the mud beach". For Heaney, the "bog [...] preserves [...] the whole of human history", while Mahon sees "the poet as anthropologist, engaged in an

awestruck search for some sign of the persistence of the *person*.”¹⁸⁸ [emphasis mine] In “Going Home” Mahon seems to negotiate his influence between the groundedness of Heaney and the metaphysical lack of metaphysics of Larkin. However, Hull remains little more than a vignette and is far removed from anthropological place.

Heaney would have no qualms calling a poem “Coming Home” as home for Heaney is some perpetual place closely connected to personal and cultural identity, but Mahon calls his poem “Going Home”, when the “last/Homecoming” is taking the ferry into Hull to closed pubs and no public transport. Interestingly, Mahon’s poem “Homecoming” avoids anthropological place altogether. Paradoxically, “Homecoming” connects one Augèan non-place with the other: a “six-hour flight”, a “bus into town” and “a bar”. No home, no “good books”, no “good bed”, no “vase”. Interestingly, the speakers in Mahon’s “Going Home” and in “Homecoming” never arrive home. His speakers, like the one in “Spring in Belfast” must still learn to know their place.

This may be the reason while this original version of “Going Home” was replaced in the *Collected Poems* (which only anthologized poems Mahon “wishes to preserve”, as the blurb of the 1999 version states).

Mahon seems a better poet negotiating his Irish environment in a much less forced way than Heaney. Declan Kiberd criticizes Mahon and his contemporaries – “poets born too late to take part in the heroic phase, either of Ireland or of modern poetry” – for mimicking the “desperately self-deprecating urban wit” of Auden and Larkin and turning Ireland into a country that “was disappointing all by turning into a botched version of England.”¹⁸⁹

Larkin has little to do with a “botched version of England”. His ‘Irish’ poems and – most hauntingly “Dublinesque”, written so much later – confirm what Larkin wrote to

¹⁸⁸ Kiberd 1991, p. 1315

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 1311/1312

Sutton upon first arriving in Belfast: “As a matter of fact, the mad Irish aren’t so mad: they can be very nice indeed.” But even so: “Still, the mind its own place is [...]: I suppose I am reasonably contented here.”¹⁹⁰ Larkin could find a place of the mind in Ireland. Abroad.

¹⁹⁰ *SL*, p. 167/8

Chapter 4

'Like a slightly unconvincing translation from a French Symbolist. I wish I could write like this more often': Larkin and France

Writing in response to Maeve Brennan's account of her holiday in France in 1963 Larkin is characteristically reductionist in his evaluation of the foreign country: "how terrible France sounds, all no post and thunderbolts"¹⁹¹ successfully creating the gruff impression of a man who has never set foot in France and is altogether sceptical of foreign lands. Eleven years earlier, Larkin's attitude had differed profoundly. On a short trip to Paris with Bruce Montgomery in May 1952, Larkin seems almost breathless with excitement when he writes to Colin and Patsy Strang in Belfast: "My heart beats in a new, queer way & I daren't lie on my left side for fear of stopping it."¹⁹² With Montgomery, shortly before their long-lasting friendship would become markedly cooler, Larkin for once lives the life of a French bohemian:

On Friday night we drank till late, on Saturday we saw the Monet, drank what can only have been a bottle of champagne each in the Ritz Bar & saw Benjamin Britten [...] & at night after a luxurious meal went to a night-club where Bechet was reputed to be appearing [...] we did hear Claude Luter's band, which I knew from records & was pretty exciting at times.

France, and particularly Paris, in this early personal account differs profoundly from Larkin's later attitude expressed to Maeve Brennan. For Maeve's benefit, Larkin puts on his gruff, but sympathetic persona of abroad-defying sourpuss.

It is the same persona that claims to find "foreign languages irrelevant" in an

¹⁹¹ Maeve Brennan, *The Philip Larkin I Knew*, Manchester University Press, 2002, p. 163/4

¹⁹² *SL*, p. 183

interview¹⁹³ and continues – referring to his own *High Windows*: “If that glass thing over there is a window, then it isn’t a fenster or a *fenêtre* or whatever” only to conclude with an exasperated: “*Hautes Fenêtres*, my God!” Many a critic has been fooled by that persona of Larkin’s who claims to find foreign languages not worth his attention but in the very same sentence reveals a casual knowledge of languages not his own. Edna Longley observes: “Although Larkin scorned the idea that *High Windows* might be called *Hautes Fenêtres* the English title reeks of the nineties as influenced by French symbolism.”¹⁹⁴

Despite his public protestations to the contrary, Larkin’s work has been repeatedly linked with that of the French *Symbolistes*, most frequently prompted by his own judgement of “Absences”: “I fancy it sounds like a different, better poet than myself. The last line sounds like a slightly-unconvincing translation from a French symbolist. I wish I could write like this more often.”¹⁹⁵ Larkin casually quotes Mallarmé’s principles of writing in his letters to Monica Jones¹⁹⁶, refers to himself as “the Laforgue of Pearson Park”¹⁹⁷, owns editions of Baudelaire, Gautier and Laforgue¹⁹⁸ and adopts Baudelaire’s Delphine and Hippolyta in his “Englished”¹⁹⁹ version of “Femmes Damnées” (written under Larkin’s Brunette Coleman synonym).

Barbara Everett²⁰⁰, Andrew Motion and John Osborne have all traced Symbolist influences in Larkin, but I would like to suggest that - while Symbolist leanings are

¹⁹³ *RW*, p. 69

¹⁹⁴ Edna Longley, “Poète Maudit Manqué”, in: *Philip Larkin 1922-1985 A Tribute*, George Hartley (ed.), The Marvell Press, London, 1988, p. 230

¹⁹⁵ Quoted in: Andrew Motion “Philip Larkin and Symbolism” in: Regan 1997, p. 45

¹⁹⁶ *LM*, p. 75 “I mentally pick up ideas for poems, but ‘poems are written with words’”

¹⁹⁷ *SL*, p. 460

¹⁹⁸ Larkin owned only three French-language editions. See Graham Chesters, “Larkin’s Books: Sidelining French Literature”, in: *Oxford Journals, Humanities, French Studies Bulletin Volume 27, Issue 100*, pp. 72-75, where Chesters observes: “Larkin is enthused by Baudelaire’s lapidary comment: ‘Immense depths of thought in expressions of common speech [...]’, p. 74, which corresponds almost exactly to Larkin’s view that literature should use “language in the way we all use it”, *RW*, p.72

¹⁹⁹ See Barbara Everett’s use of the term in “Philip Larkin: After Symbolism”, in: Regan 1997, p. 66

²⁰⁰ Barbara Everett, “Philip Larkin: After Symbolism”, in: Stephen Regan (ed.), *Philip Larkin Contemporary Critical Essays*, Palgrave Macmillan, Houndmills, Basingstoke, 1999, pp. 55-70

certainly present in Larkin's poetry - his negotiation of French poetry transcends the mere translation of certain elements that stirred an emotional response in him. Indeed I would like to argue that his fascination with the cultural Other primarily stems from the desire to be "a different [...] poet from [him]self" – sometimes even a better one. Models of literary cultural Otherness allow Larkin to explore a poetics that in its culmination is far removed from a cultural English narrowness. While his negotiation of French literary sources is by no means a systematic process, he gradually moves from direct translation over cultural approximation to something that I am tempted to call – as a reaction to Barbara Everett's term "Englishing" – "Europeanising". In exactly the same way that Larkin's personae collide in his evaluation of France in the letter to Maeve and in the account of his trip to Paris does Larkin's engagement with French poetry offer him the chance to try on different modes, styles and personae: *strangeness makes sense*.

Tucked away in the workbooks we find what we might call a finger exercise when Larkin writes a literal translation of Paul Verlaine's "À Mademoiselle ***". Graham Chesters quotes the direct translation of the blazon which crudely assesses the pleasing physical features of a "rustique beauté" in pejorative terms, only to conclude wryly: "Little of the symbolist desire for transcendence here, but much evidence of a stereotypical French lewdness that Larkin clearly found appealing in its difference."²⁰¹ Larkin, master of immaculate rhyme, does not even attempt to find the corresponding rhymes to the enclosing rhymes in the French original.

It is tempting to suspect a thematical proximity here, but it can hardly be more than a coincidence that the Verlaine translation in Larkin's Workbook 2 appears in the middle

²⁰¹ Graham Chesters, "Larkin and Baudelaire's Damned Women", in: *Making Connections: Essays in French Culture and Society in Honour of Philip Thody*, James Dolamore (ed.), Peter Lang, Oxford, 1998, p. 83

of the drafts for Larkin's Symbolist poem "Absences". Chesters notes: "The [Verlaine] translation [...] gives every appearance of having been transcribed at an earlier date, probably the first entry hidden furtively deep into a new workbook." Adopting the lecherous nature of Verlaine's poem allows Larkin not only to be different from himself – Chesters rightly notes the almost grotesque discrepancy between the more refined sentiment of "Absences" and the translation – but also momentarily to escape the English literary tradition which does not tend to casually endorse "lesbian couples and frank appreciations of the female body".²⁰²

A lesbian couple reappears in Larkin in his re-working of Charles Baudelaire's "Femmes damnées" – perhaps for the same reason. Larkin's "Femmes Damnées" from 1943 is – in his own words – "evidence that I once read at least one 'foreign' poem though I can't remember how far, if at all, my verses are based on the original."²⁰³ Despite the flippant tone, Larkin still proves his famous exclamation "Foreign poetry? No!"²⁰⁴ wrong. Paradoxically, the poem that has the most obvious French connection appears as quintessentially English. In his Brunette Coleman period, Larkin thoroughly "Englishes" Baudelaire's "Femmes Damnées (À la pâle clarté des lampes languissantes)" in Everett's sense. For Everett, Larkin "Englishes" French poetry as "a form of translation which fully recognises that changes of times and styles make literalism inappropriate"²⁰⁵ in the mode the Augustans first championed. The translation of the French source is thus not a literal one in the way Larkin attempts with his Verlaine translation, but an approximation of the French poem into English culture.

In the introduction to her *Trouble at Willow Gables and Other Fictions* Coleman-Larkin writes of her scepticism of foreign-ness:

²⁰² Ibid., p. 83

²⁰³ Motion in Regan 1997, p. 44

²⁰⁴ *FR*, p. 25

²⁰⁵ Everett in Regan 1997, p. 61

I have a prejudice against foreigners which extends into literature, and I regard the introduction of Austrian new girls or trips into the Alps as unwarrantable attempts to rush the reader off his or her feet with the 'glamour' that is mistakenly supposed to hang around foreign countries. How stupid it is! To my mind, there is nowhere so glamorous as England, with its public parks, its daffodils, young girls taking out dogs, old copies of *The Tatler*, [...] *The Times* on the breakfast table with sausages and liver, and dances at the Tennis Club in small county towns. As soon as I find a story with words like 'kopje' or 'veldt' or 'liana' in it, or references to monkeys or native porters or chamois, I put it firmly back on the shelf.²⁰⁶

Larkin takes an almost childish delight in sketching Brunette Coleman's exaggerated Little England, but the characteristics of that England find their way into "Femmes Damnées": "the milk on the step", "The *Guardian* in the letter-box", the "labourers, petrol pumps, a Green Line bus,/And plots of cabbages set inbetween" set Larkin's "Femmes Damnées" firmly in England, introducing particularly English features that do not find their French equivalents in the Baudelairean original. Delphine and Hippolyte, the lesbian lovers from Baudelaire, turn into the thoroughly English Rosemary and Rachel in Larkin. Where in Baudelaire Hippolyte merely languishes in "profonds coussins"²⁰⁷, Larkin turns these pillows into "Cushions from Harrods", firmly placing the scene in a culturally English context.

Tim Trengrove-Jones notes how, for Larkin, "Differences in language came to mean inevitable and irreconcilable differences in culture"²⁰⁸ after his experience of speechlessness on his visits to Germany in his youth. If it is really the case that "Home for Larkin was an idiom, a nation of like-languaged people"²⁰⁹ as Trengrove-Jones suggests, then there is no question why Larkin not only translates but "Englishes" Baudelaire. But maybe this is an assertion that comes a little too easily. In "Englishing" Baudelaire, Larkin actively engages with the cultural otherness of the French original.

²⁰⁶ Philip Larkin, *Trouble at Willow Gables and Other Fictions*, James Booth (ed.), Faber and Faber Limited, London, 2002, p. 267/8

²⁰⁷ Accessed online 29/07/2011 <http://fleursdumal.org/poem/180>

²⁰⁸ Trengrove-Jones 1992, p. 57

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 57

This “bringing home” of Baudelaire shows a larger appreciation of and cultural engagement with Baudelaire’s “Femmes Damnées” than a mere translation could ever merit. The Englishness of the poem, however, remains culturally narrow, something that Larkin would drop later on to write poems that do not rely on such obvious dichotomies as French – English.

Indeed, Larkin’s “Femmes Damnées” is even more than just an English version of Baudelaire. As Timothy Chesters notes, Larkin adopts certain motifs of Baudelaire’s to create his very own images: the milk on the step is not “mere Larkinian clutter”²¹⁰ and an apparently typically English feature, it is also consistent in the imagery of liquid that runs through the poem. Larkin takes Delphine’s “vin de triomphe” and renders not only “the original symbol [...] as material detail”, but makes it part of a coherent image: the milk from the first stanza turns into the wine of the third stanza turns into the spilt water in the last stanza. Chesters wryly concludes: “The lost girl is crying over spilt milk”²¹¹ while simultaneously noting the homoerotic subtext milk also has in Larkin’s *A Girl in Winter*. Interestingly, the “vase of flowers” that has spilt in “Femmes Damnées” is as potent a symbol as “That vase” in “Home Is So Sad”. Similarly, the metaphorical curtains - “Qui levaient le rideau de sa jeune candeur”²¹² – in Baudelaire turn into actual curtains in Larkin: “Patterns on the curtains/Drawn the night before” and “the curtained sun” indicating a kind of stifling, hot intimacy which also appears in Baudelaire: “nos rideaux fermés nous séparent du monde.”²¹³

While Baudelaire’s poem keeps the reader in the room with the lesbian lovers, Larkin contrasts the lofty view from “Upstairs” and the orderliness in which “the beds have not

²¹⁰ Timothy Chesters, “ ‘The milk on the step’ Reading Larkin Abroad” in: *About Larkin*, No. 22, October 2006, p.22

²¹¹ Ibid., p. 23

²¹² [caresses] “That drew aside the veil of her young innocence”, translation by William Aggeler, *The Flowers of Evil*, accessed online 29/07/2011 <http://fleursdumal.org/poem/180>, the following English quotes from Baudelaire all reference Aggeler’s translation

²¹³ “our drawn curtains separate us from the world”

been touched” with the claustrophobia of the cushions “strewn in tumbled heaps” downstairs. The main focus of the vista from upstairs is thus not necessarily the Englishness of the “petrol pumps” and the “Green line bus”, but the fact that one can perceive the life outside from upstairs, while Rosemary and Rachel are enclosed downstairs with only each other to turn to. Significantly, “The fire is ash”; last night’s passions are extinguished not only by the light of day but by a burning sense of shame as exemplified by the burning sun: “the room grows hot”. Larkin thus manages to instill the Baudelairean sentiment into his version of “Femmes Damnées”, completely leaving out the lover’s passionate argument about sin and hell. Larkin’s version thus shuns Baudelaire’s Catholic diatribe and introduces a kind of wry English Protestantism. Most importantly, Larkin does not translate. Larkin “Englishes” to a certain extent. First and foremost, however, he distills Baudelaire into a much shorter poem and finds his own, Baudelaire-inspired symbolism. If Larkin condemned poetry translations, he made one exception: translations are worthwhile if “the original poem can be digested in the imagination of the translator and used to produce a new poem.”²¹⁴ What sounds almost exactly like the mode of translation Everett refers to, is here slightly extended by Larkin. He might have substituted “new poem” with “different poem” to emphasize how the new poem opens up a new poetic (and maybe even cultural) horizon. Trengrove-Jones fittingly suggests that Larkin’s

heightened sensitivity to linguistic otherness [...] allows him to achieve writing of an order far finer than anything which the crass dismissals in prose or interview could have led us to expect. [...] the experience of linguistic otherness does seem to greatly enrich his practice in his own tongue.²¹⁵

I would like to enhance this argument by replacing “linguistic otherness” with “cultural Otherness”: Larkin’s awareness of cultural Otherness set against his very own English

²¹⁴ Quoted in: Trengrove-Jones 1992, p. 66

²¹⁵ Trengrove-Jones 1992, p.58

background seems to “enrich his practice in his own tongue”. It is this awareness which shines through in Larkin’s French influences which – after “Femmes Damnées” – turn much more subtle, but recur often enough to suggest Larkin’s indebtedness to French poetry.

Everett suggests a more comprehensive reading of Baudelairean influences in Larkin’s *oeuvre*, but the mentioned-in-passing parallels to works by Baudelaire remain slightly sketchy. Larkin’s “wonderfully English”²¹⁶ “Toads” does indeed have a passing resemblance to Baudelaire’s “Chacun sa Chimère” in the way the chimaeras in Baudelaire’s poem wrap themselves around their nescient human victims just like Larkin’s toad squats on his life. Baudelaire, however, makes a philosophical statement full of underlying, menacing drama while Larkin’s speaker remains typically flippant in his wry complaint. Everett’s reading implies that Larkin “Englishes” Baudelaire’s chimaeras in the same way that he “Englishes” Mallarmé’s “champagne and poesy” in the gin and tonic of “Sympathy in White Major”, but she withholds further evidence.

Everett further mentions that Larkin’s “Arrivals, Departures” “reads like a beautiful imitation of Baudelaire’s ‘Le Port’”²¹⁷ from his collection *Le spleen de Paris*. Upon a closer look, however, Baudelaire’s poem with its main sentiment “Un port est un séjour charmant pour une âme fatigué des luttes de la vie”²¹⁸ has very little in common with Larkin’s slightly skewed envelope sonnet. “Arrivals, Departures” offers no comfort for the weary traveller and shares with Baudelaire no more than the mere setting of the port. As parts of *Le spleen de Paris*, both “Chacun sa Chimère” and “Le Port” are prose poems and thus bear no structural relation to Larkin’s meticulously crafted rhymes. Similarly, the idea that Larkin references Baudelaire’s “Les Fenêtres” in his own “High

²¹⁶ Everett in: Regan 1997, p. 63

²¹⁷ Ibid., p. 63

²¹⁸ “a port is a welcome abode for a soul tired of life’s struggles” [translation mine]

Windows” is tempting, but improbable. When Baudelaire’s speaker in another of his prose poems is more intrigued by what happens behind closed, darkened windows than behind open, sunlit windows, he is looking to the people behind the closed windows to substitute for real life. When Larkin’s speaker in “High Windows” contemplates the “deep blue air” behind the “sun-comprehending glass”, he longs for an abstract, unreachable transcendence. “High Windows” is definitely not the “Englished” version of “Les Fenêtres”. The setting of the hospital in Mallarmé’s “Les Fenêtres” perhaps marks a parallel to Larkin’s “The Building” rather than to “High Windows”, but here it is worth mentioning that the patients can not escape their surroundings in dreams as the dying old man in the second part of “Les Fenêtres” does. Additionally, “The Building” – despite the instruction “For the moment, wait,/Look down at the yard” – never explicitly mentions a window. The speaker in Baudelaire’s “Paysage” sets up his poetic refuge in which to dream up spring in winter “high up in my attic” (“de haute de ma mansarde”), but it is a far cry to presume that Larkin’s symbolist outburst in “Absences” – “Such attics cleared of me! Such absences!” – refers to this particular Baudelairean vantage point. The same is true for Baudelaire’s preface to *Le spleen de Paris*, in which the gospel of poetry is “carried up to attic rooms higher than the mist in the street”.²¹⁹ It is probable that Larkin adopted certain themes from Baudelaire but nothing is as articulate as to allow drawing definite lines between Baudelaire’s *oeuvre* and Larkin’s work. If Larkin is really looking for difference, for strangeness, mere themes will not be enough to satisfy his desire of writing “like a different poet”.

“Sympathy in White Major”, written in 1967, then, could work as yet another implement to fulfill this particular desire. Claude Rawson is one of those critics who are fooled by Larkin’s gruff, abroad-defying persona and goes as far as to suggest that

²¹⁹ Charles Baudelaire, *Paris Spleen*, translated from the French by Martin Sorrell, One World Classics Ltd., Richmond, 2010, p. 3

Larkin's choice of title is a conscious mockery not only of "French poets and American painters who call their compositions symphonies in white" but also of "English readers who are suckers for that stuff." Rawson emphasizes

how separable Larkin's teasing Symbolist titles can be from any detailed interest in the poems they express a discretion from. When a poem about drinking gin and tonic has a title which resembles that of a poem about a beautiful white swan, it is possible to suspect that the puzzle as to a possible relation between them may be something of a plant, and that part of the derision may be reserved for the critics who fall for it. The relish Larkin reported to Jean Hartley at 'the thought of his readers hunting through *Hamlet*' for the source of "The Less Deceived" was not likely to be diminished in cases where there was no source at all to be found.²²⁰

Whoever thinks that Larkin would choose a title with no reason other than to confuse his readers has only had an all too superficial look at his poems. In the final typed copy of the poem, Larkin changes the title's original "Symphony" to "Sympathy" by hand. Within her framework of "Englising" poetry, Everett perceives "Sympathy in White Major" as a "fragment of translation"²²¹; a cultural approximation of Gautier's Frenchness into English. And indeed, the last stanza of Larkin's poem with its enumeration of colloquialisms "decent chap", "straight as a die" and "proper sport" appears as "intensely English, even Little English"²²² – the only problem being that Larkin's speaker who drinks in "private pledge" has no equivalent whatsoever in Gautier's poem. Gautier's "Symphonie en blanc majeur", written in the 1850s, is about the astonishing and otherworldly whiteness of a flock of "femmes-cygnés" – swan-maidens – of which one is especially beautiful, detailed in a kind of symbolist blazon in white throughout the 18, regularly rhymed four-line stanzas. Larkin's three stanzas have nothing of the enchanting unapproachability of Gautier's swan-maiden. Here is a speaker who could not be more down to earth, "a real good sort".

²²⁰ Claude Rawson, "Larkin's Desolate Attics" in: *Theory and Interpretation of Literature*, Charu Sheel Singh (ed.), Anmol Publications PVT Ltd., 1996, p. 36

²²¹ Everett in: Regan 1997, p. 61

²²² Everett in: Regan 1997, p. 61

Rawson may be wrong in denying any connection between Gautier's and Larkin's poem, but he certainly introduces some caution in relation to Everett's slightly over-enthusiastic evaluation of the poem's French influences. The toast in "Sympathy in White Major" may well be an echo of Mallarmé's "Salut" as Everett claims in relation to her elaborations on Gautier, but the key to Larkin's poem lies in an affinity to Gautier's literary aesthetic. It is Gautier who proposes "l'art pour l'art" as a literary principle. If a poem is "written solely for the poem's sake"²²³ the poet is – by association – cast as independent of moral or social commitments in his poetry. As the *flâneur* later in Baudelaire and Laforgue – an artistic figure we shall elucidate later – "the poet is a man apart"²²⁴; not liable to his immediate surroundings; without anthropological place. If we take the deliberately crooked title of Larkin's "Sympathy in White Major" as a tribute not only to Gautier's individual poem in which the swan can easily be seen as a symbol for (unreachable) artistic inspiration, but also to the underlying principle of art for art's sake, then Larkin's poem does emerge as a translation in Everett's sense.

James Booth notes the "darker, self-elegiac tone" of "Sympathy in White Major" and identifies the poem as one "in a sequence of poems written at five-year intervals, marking his [Larkin's] birthday."²²⁵ It is in "Sympathy in White Major" that Larkin buries the idea of being the poet as "man apart" around his 45th birthday. The two voices in the poem – one in normal type, the other in italics – are the voices of the same speaker, a man who toasts himself ironically in the face of his poetic ambitions and what became of them.

Emanuel J. Mickel, Jr. underlines how Gautier's poem is not only seen as the "prime

²²³ Quoted in: Jutta Ernst, *Edgar Allan Poe und die Poetik der Arabesken*, Königshausen und Neumann, Würzburg, 1996, p. 181

²²⁴ Keith Tester (ed.), *The Flâneur*, Routledge, Abingdon, 1994, p. 4

²²⁵ Booth 2005, p. 193

example” of Gautier’s work in his collection *Emaux et camées* but also – and more importantly –

as an illustration of two points: (1) that the sole interest of the poet should be the creation of beauty, and (2) that the technique of one art may be employed for another, the theory of ‘transposition’.²²⁶

What is established here is once more the idea of “art for art’s sake” that Larkin’s speaker in “Sympathy in White Major” has to abandon, but what is more interesting is the idea of “transposition” in which poetry might be transposed into music or painting or vice versa. Mickel sketches beautifully how Gautier structures his poem as a symphonic poem. Significantly, Larkin does not attempt to write a symphonic poem himself, but he nevertheless appreciates the musical connection of Gautier’s poem in his own with the tiniest of ironical nods to the French poet: Larkin’s speaker drops “four cubes of ice/*Chimingly* in a glass” [emphasis mine] thus emphasizing his own shortcomings: he cannot write a symphonic poem.

Preparing the drink takes up almost all of the first stanza. The gin and tonic becomes almost larger-than-life in its appetizing crispness and reminds the reader of the brilliant too-good-to-be-true advertisements in Larkin’s “Essential Beauty”: “sharply-pictured groves/Of how life should be.” It is as if the first person singular speaker in the poem takes one last pleasure in not only literally preparing the drink but in rendering it in words that do his poetic calling justice – not with elaborate poetic symbolism but with images even the most common reader can relate to. Fittingly, the last line of the first stanza marks the beginning of the self-elegy: “*He devoted his life to others*”. These are exactly the “others” who do not necessarily understand the speaker’s poetic calling. The speaker here adopts a platitude common to obituaries that have little of substance to say. If “the creation of beauty” is the poet’s “only interest” “others” are no part of the

²²⁶ Emanuel J. Mickel, Jr., “An Interpretation of Gautier’s ‘Symphonie en blanc majeur’” in: *Modern Philology*, Vol. 68, No. 4, May, 1971, p. 338

equation. It is striking how this second voice of the speaker with its ironic undertone almost interrupts the description of the drink.

Returning to his normal voice, the speaker gives a matter-of-fact account of his ambitions. Here again, the Gautier theme of “l’art pour l’art” is evident. The poet was at work “While other people wore like clothes/The human beings in their days”. The poet as man apart is not bound to engage socially. While others did exactly that and took part in social occasions Larkin’s speakers typically dodge, the poet had grander objectives: “I set myself to bring to those/Who thought I could the lost displays.” It becomes apparent that the poet – the speaker’s first voice – does not ask for much but relies on the opinion of those sympathetic to him: “those/Who thought I could”. Those are the ones that will use the diction of the last stanza, will pat him on the back and ensure him and others that he is “a real good sort”, but this engagement does not gloss over the fact that the speaker’s art has not lived up to his own ambitions. Disillusioned, the speaker sketches how the idea of himself as a poet was good for a while, while his closest personal allies could all give in to the illusion: they “were nearer thus/(Or so we thought) to all the fuss/Than if we’d missed it separately.” The rare use of the first person plural pronoun “we” in this context is particularly striking: the poet could – for one reason or another – not apply himself as much as he planned. Life interrupts art. This is the “fault” that eventually lets him sound his own elegy.

The third stanza is almost completely taken up by the ironic self-elegy in italics. The almost unending enumeration of platitudes in the “private pledge” is presented in terms that are as unpoetic, as “plain English” as possible. The epithets “*a real good sort*”, “*a proper sport*”, “*Head and shoulders above the rest*” etc. seem to hark back to Larkin’s “English” Brunette Coleman novels. The use of the almost-colloquialisms marks the artist’s total renunciation of his high ambitions: he gives up his poetic language.

The final toast in the italicized self-elegy “*Here’s to the whitest man I know*” is cut short by the poet-speaker interrupting in the last line – a reverse to the first stanza in which the poetic diction is abruptly ended by the beginning of the self-elegy. “*to the whitest man I know*” and “*Though white is not my favourite colour*” refer back to the title of the poem and thus to Gautier. That the adjective is repeated not as an adjective denoting the colour white but the poet’s engagement with others, is both a clever nod to Gautier’s “*Symphonie...*” which describes the swan-maiden’s whiteness in opulent detail, but also a kind of “*Englising*” in the sense that Everett establishes. “*Though white is not my favourite colour*”, the cutting in of the poet, is both a last defiant struggle and a note of bitter, almost sullen resignation. His last statement that simply states – not exclaims on a note of poetic chivalry! – that he has wished for something else than devotion to others is completely drowned in the grand finale of the toast/self-elegy. It is clear that the artist has lost his last straw. He gives in to plain-language, non-poetic, common life.

In his interpretation of “*Symphonie en blanc majeur*” Mickel notes how Gautier gradually establishes a “*contrast between the soft-warm and hard-cold imagery*” in his description of the swan-maiden, while the imagery of coldness and of hardness prevails over warmth and softness: “*the only words in the [eighteenth] stanza which inject a feeling of softness, do not refer to the swan-maiden herself, but are only present in the poet’s wish.*”²²⁷ It may be debatable whether Larkin’s familiarity with Gautier’s poem was so intimate as to grasp these slight nuances, but it is astonishing how Larkin not only builds his poem on a corresponding dichotomy (poet vs common man) but also connects the poet-persona to the icy freshness of the gin and tonic which is set against the human contact implied by the first person plural pronoun “*we*”. Art for art’s sake

²²⁷ Mickel 1971, p. 344

clashes with the social strains of ordinary life. For Trengrove-Jones the preparation of the gin and tonic as “a specifically national ritual”²²⁸ resonates with implications of “the club, the colonies, the lonely colonials administrator, the empire”²²⁹ but strikingly, these implications are completely lost on the continental European reader of Larkin’s poem.

“Sympathy in White Major” is thus an homage which is much more subtle than Larkin’s re-working of Baudelaire’s “Femmes Damnées”, but nonetheless fits Everett’s mode of “Englishing”. Gautier is not translated but clearly referred to in a culturally English framework. Whether the gin and tonic is as English as Everett and Trengrove-Jones proclaim it remains questionable, but the choice of words in the ironically plain self-elegy are deliberately as English as can be to juxtapose artistic vision with the social engagement of the common man.

If Baudelaire and Gautier have made their impression on Larkin with individual works or principles, Jules Laforgue seems to be his preeminent French influence. It is the underlying influence of Laforgue that allows Larkin to create poems that are truly different from himself. This process and the developed approximation of Laforgue finds its culmination in a Europeanisation of anthropological place in “The Card-Players”.

Laforgue appears in yet another outburst of the gruff, monolingual Larkin – “If that chap Laforgue wants me to read him he’d better start writing in English!”²³⁰ - once more betraying Larkin’s knowledge of foreign poetry despite his protestations to the contrary. Larkin identifies himself as the “Laforgue of Pearson Park”. Arthur Symons in *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* describes Laforgue as “Strictly correct in manner, top-hatted, soberly cravatted, given to English jackets and clerical overcoats, or

²²⁸ Trengrove-Jones 1992, p. 64

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 63

²³⁰ Quoted in: Osborne 2008, p. 58

in case of necessity an invariable umbrella carried under his arm.”²³¹ We know about Larkin’s penchant for dressing snappily in college and this description of Laforgue is not a far cry from Larkin himself – bicycle clips not included.

The most important connection to Laforgue, however, is revealed in what Larkin confided to Arthur Terry in the early 1950s: Laforgue’s “L’Hiver qui vient” is the poem Larkin has “been trying to write all [his] life.”²³² Laforgue’s poem, then, merits a closer look. “L’Hiver qui vient” was originally published in Jules Laforgue’s *Derniers vers* in 1890 and found its way into Larkin’s *The Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse* in the form of Martin Bell’s translation “Winter Coming On”. Introducing his translations of Laforgue Peter Dale outlines Laforgue’s influence on T.S. Eliot: “Everywhere one sees echoes and influence but nothing can be felt as a straight ‘lift’ from Laforgue.”²³³ I will return to the question of Eliot’s (French) influence on Larkin at a later point. For the time being Dale’s quotation is eerily valid not only for Eliot, but also for Larkin: Laforgue, and especially “L’Hiver qui vient”, seem to leave far-reaching footprints in Larkin’s poetry, but none so distinct as to trudge over an entire poem.

Edna Longley notes Larkin’s use of an “imagery of clouds, wind, trees, sky and moon”²³⁴ that he seems to have adopted from Laforgue’s “L’Imitation de Notre-Dame la Lune selon Jules Laforgue”. Imagery of wind, sky and moon is prevalent in this volume. “XIII” mentions “les ceils couleur de limaille/Où a Lune a ses funérailles”.²³⁵ “Lunes en Détresse” watches “la Lune/chevauche/Les nuages noirs à tous crins”.²³⁶

²³¹ Quoted in: Jules Laforgue, *Poems*, translated by Peter Dale, Anvil Press Poetry, Vancouver, 2001, p. 19

²³² Quoted in: Osborne 2008, p. 58

²³³ Laforgue 2001, p. 14

²³⁴ Longley 1988, p. 229

²³⁵ “iron-filing-coloured sky/Where the Moon has obsequies on high.” – all of the following translations are from Jules Laforgue, *Poems*, translated by Peter Dale, Anvil Press, Vancouver, 2001

²³⁶ “The Moon is riding, just you watch,/The black clouds, all with flowing mane”

“XII” of the *Derniers vers* sees the “Nuit noire, maisons closes, grand vent”.²³⁷ The first stanza from “(J’écoute dans la nuit rager le vent d’automne)” reads:

J’écoute dans la nuit rager le vent d’automne,
Sous le toits gémissant combine de galetas
Où des mourants songeurs que n’assiste personne
Se retournant sans fin sur de vieux matelas
Écoutent au dehors rager le vent d’automne.²³⁸

Laforgue writes in “Nobles et Touchant Divigations sous la Lune”: “Et le vent qui beugle, apocalyptique Bête/S’abattant sur des toits aux habitants pourris”.²³⁹ And in “L’Hiver qui vient” the speaker exclaims “Oh! Le vent!...” and watches the “nuées accourues des côtes de la Manche”.²⁴⁰ In the same poem there are “patrouilles des nuées en déroute/Que le vent malmée vers les transatlantique bercails”.²⁴¹

Larkin picks up Laforgue’s imagery of wind and clouds in various poems: “The wind outside/Ushers in evening rain” in Larkin’s “Best Society” – compare how the autumn wind roars *outside* (“au dehors”) in Laforgue’s “(J’Écoute dans la nuit rager le vent d’automne)”.²⁴² Mr Bleaney is confronted with “the frigid wind/Tousling the clouds”, while “the wind/Is ruining [...] courting places” in “Afternoons”. There are the “rapid clouds” and “the wind-picked sky” in “Sad Steps”. In “Vers de Société” the speaker remembers “hearing the noise of wind,/And looking out to see the moon thinned/To an air-sharpened blade” – there is also Laforgue’s “un fin croissant de lune”²⁴³ here. Something similar appears in Larkin’s “Talking in Bed”: “*Outside*, the wind’s

²³⁷ “Night black, licensed houses, wind high”

²³⁸ All night I hear the wind of autumn roar.

Beneath the groaning roofs how many a glory-hole -
Where dying dreamers no one tends any more
On old mattresses endlessly twist and roll -
Can hear outside the wind of autumn roar.

²³⁹ “And wind, Beast Of Apocalypse, forever bawling,/Menaces the roofs of mouldered tenants unbudged”

²⁴⁰ “clouds, come rushing from the Channel coasts”

²⁴¹ “flocks of routed clouds that the wind goads/And harries to the transatlantic fold!”

²⁴² “All night I hear the wind of autumn roar”

²⁴³ “a slender crescent moon”

incomplete unrest/Builds and disperses clouds about the sky.” [emphasis mine]

“Talking in Bed” thus appears as the negative companion piece to Larkin’s early “Wedding-Wind” (1946) in which the wind’s unrest turns the new bride’s melancholy happiness into an objective correlative: “All is the wind/Hunting through clouds and forests, thrashing/My apron and the hanging cloths on the line.” There is the clear distinction between inside and outside also in “The Card-Players”: “Outside, the rain/Courses in cart-ruts down the deep mud lane”. There is a “gale” and the “Wet century-wide trees clash”. The final exclamation “Rain, wind and fire!” seems to be mirrored in “Le vent, la pluie, oh! Le vent, la pluie”²⁴⁴ in Laforgue’s “Complainte de l’Automne Monotone”: wind, clouds and moon find their way into Larkin’s poetry.

The poem that has the clearest Laforgue influence, however, is – despite its titular debts to Sir Philip Sidney – Larkin’s “Sad Steps”. Again, much as Dale on Eliot, we can deduce echoes rather than explicit parallels, but the Laforguean echoes betray Larkin’s indebtedness to the French poet. Incidentally, it is “L’Hiver qui vient” which lends itself to the comparison most readily. When Larkin’s speaker in “Sad Steps” “part[s] thick curtains”, in “L’Hiver qui vient” there are “Rideaux écartés du haut de balcons des grèves/Devant l’océan des faubourgs” – “Curtains open on balconies high on strands over roofs/Of suburbs looking like the sea”²⁴⁵. The “wind-picked sky” in “Sad Steps” is reminiscent of Laforgue’s “le vent, cette nuit, il en fait de belles” in “L’Hiver qui vient”. While the speaker in “Sad Steps” looks down onto the “wedge-shadowed gardens” below – the “wedge” of the moon once more corresponds to Laforgue’s “croissant lune” – the speaker in “L’Hiver qui vient” witnesses the wind have “a high old time” and exclaims “Ô dégâts, ô nids, ô modestes jardinets!” – “modest little garden rows!”

In his introduction to Laforgue’s poems, Dale admits that “Laforgue was always over-

²⁴⁴ “The wind, the rain, oh! The wind, the rain!”

fond of exclamation marks.”²⁴⁶ In “Sad Steps”, Larkin seems to temporarily share this fondness: “Lozenge of love! Medallion of art! O wolves of memory! Immensements!” “Immensements” seems to be a Larkinesque neologism crediting the French indebtedness of “Sad Steps”.²⁴⁷ John Osborne claims that Larkin’s rare exclamations in poems like “Gathering Wood”, “Absences”, “Sad Steps” or “The Card-Players” are “picked up from Rimbaud”²⁴⁸ but in this context it is more probable to credit Laforgue’s influence. Additionally to the above mentioned exclamations there are “Oh, tombée de la pluie! Oh! Tombée de la nuit,/Oh! Le vent””, “Oh, dans les bruines”, “Ô triste antienne”, “Oh! Les tournants des grandes routes”, “Oh! Leurs ornières des chars”, the above-mentioned “Ô dégâts” and “Oh! et puis” in “L’Hiver qui vient” alone. Interestingly, there are only four of Laforgue’s twelve “oh”-exclamations left in Bell’s translation. The botched exclamation “No,/One shivers slightly” corresponds to Laforgue’s “Non, non!” in “L’Hiver qui vient” but translates the Laforguean drama into Larkinesque wryness.

Larkin’s “Medallion of art!” has definite roots in the French tradition. Baudelaire refers to the moon as “médaille neuve”, but again the similarities are more pointed in the Laforguean context. In Laforgue’s “Complainte de cette bonne lune”, the moon is presented as “le médaillon” and the “Litanies des premiers quartiers de la lune” see the moon as a “Blanc médaillon”. Further on in the same poem, the moon is the “Lune bénie/Des insomnies”²⁴⁹ which corresponds to the speaker’s sleeplessness in “Sad Steps”. The moon’s “hardness” in “Sad Steps” is mirrored as “la lune [...] comme un bloc de topaze” in Laforgue’s “Complainte des nostalgies préhistoriques”. In Larkin’s

²⁴⁶ Dale 2001, p. 23

²⁴⁷ Graham Chesters comprehensibly suggests that Larkin adopted the exclamation from Verhaeren, another French poet in whose poem “Un Soir” – significantly, a poem about the moon – “immensément” is repeated twice – it appears as a probable source for Larkin’s neologism

²⁴⁸ Osborne 2008, p. 56

²⁴⁹ “Moon the blest/Of sleepless rest”

early “Pigeons”, there is a “small intense lopsided moon”.

While “Sad Steps” is a poem that explicitly mourns the unavailability of youth and dreads the reality of (old) age and ultimately, death, “L’Hiver qui vient” is somewhat less bitter in its contemplation of time passing. While the speaker in Laforgue’s poem exclaims “Allons, allons, et hallali!” in the chorus and seems to express an almost child-like pleasure at the antics of the autumn wind, the final sentiment is similar to the one in “Sad Steps”, albeit less explicit: “Tous les ans, tous les ans,/J’essaierai en chœur d’en donner la note.”²⁵⁰ The years pass in a literal whirlwind and there is little the speaker can do about it. If there is a similarity in sentiment in Laforgue’s and Larkin’s poem, this is it. The speaker in Laforgue is almost elated at the drenched benches (“tous les bancs sont mouillés”) of autumn in Paris; Larkin’s speaker is almost resigned looking up at the moon. Both speakers, however, are acutely aware of the change of seasons, of time running out. “Sad Steps” is thus definitely indebted to “L’Hiver qui vient”, but the instances of reference are so abstract that it becomes hard to speak of “Sad Steps” as an “Englishing” of the French source. Interestingly, “Sad Steps” was the next poem Larkin finished right after “Sympathy in White Major”. Could it be a coincidence that the two poems with French influences were written in such close temporal proximity? However, there are other elements in Laforgue’s poem which find their way into Larkin’s *oeuvre*.

In “L’Hiver qui vient” the speaker asks himself where the “spectacles agricoles” that mark autumn have gone now that winter is on its way: “Des spectacles agricoles,/Où êtes-vous ensevelis?” Larkin’s “Show Saturday” expresses exactly this sentiment. Dale translates “spectacles agricoles” as “country shows”. In Laforgue, “un soleil blanc”

²⁵⁰ “Every year passed, every year cast/I’ll try in chorus to strike the right note out for it.”

The “trying in vain” appears as somewhat less opaque in Bell’s translation of „L’Hiver qui vient“: “O let me every year, every year, just at this time/Join in the chorus, sound the right sour note.“ Martin Bell, “Winter Coming On” in: *The Oxford Book of Twentieth Century Verse*, chosen by Philip Larkin, Clarendon Press, 1973, p. 499

illuminates the lost country show; Larkin's "Show Saturday" takes place under a "pale sky". As the crowd in Larkin disperses, the "men with hunters", their wives and "curt-haired sons" return "Back now to autumn, leaving the ended husk/Of summer"; return "*To winter coming*, as the dismantled Show/Itself dies back into the area of work" [emphasis mine]. Strikingly, Larkin employs Laforgue's title in a poem that details the end of autumn and the inevitable arrival of winter in the manner of the French poet. Interestingly, however, Larkin once more sketches a community with an almost invisible speaker, while the speaker in "L'Hiver qui vient" merely engages with clouds, sky and wind addressing winter itself. There is no immediate community in sight: "sans personne!"

If the exclamations at the end of "Absences" - "Such attics cleared of me! Such absences!" - sound like a translation of a French symbolist to Larkin himself, then the final exclamation "Rain, wind and fire! The secret, bestial peace!" at the end of Larkin's "The Card-Players" makes use of the same French rhetoric. James Booth even goes as far as to term the sonnet "a symbolist ode, its final apostrophe reminiscent of similar effects in Gautier, Baudelaire and Laforgue".²⁵¹ I have already mentioned that this exclamation corresponds to "Le vent, la pluie, oh! le vent, la pluie!" in Laforgue's "Complainte de l'Automne Monotone" and there are a few faint echoes of Laforgue's in "The Card-Players". Just like "Complainte...", Larkin's poem is set in autumn. The "rain courses", the fire is lit, the "trees clash" and "someone [...] opens mussels" – a sure sign of the season.

The scene in Laforgue's "Complainte de l'Automne Monotone" is somewhat similar: "La tisane bout, noyant mon feu;/Le vent s'époumonne".²⁵² Interestingly, Dale

²⁵¹ James Booth, "The Card-Players", in: *Fourteen English Sonnets*, Michael Hanke (ed.), WVT, Trier, 2007, p. 170

²⁵² "The brew boils over, makes my fire die;/The wind huffs till it croaks"

translates “s’époumonner” (“to tire one’s lungs”) as “croak” which corresponds with someone croaking “scraps of songs” in “The Card-Players”, but can hardly be more than a coincidence. The Laforguean wind once more blows through Larkin’s poem underlining Longley’s observation of Larkin’s imagery of “clouds, wind, trees, sky and moon”. In Larkin, “century-wide trees/Clash”; in Laforgue “Pourpres forêts” thresh in “Torrents de frais”.²⁵³ And despite Laforgue’s decidedly urban outlook onto “Paris grasseyant par chic aux prises de voiles”²⁵⁴ that stands in marked difference to Larkin’s Dutch peasant genre-piece, the overall contentment of an autumn refuge set against the roaring weather conditions outside are very similar. Larkin’s “lamplit cave” with its farcical, but still completely naturally acting personnel (with all their belching and farting) is close to Laforgue’s warm burrow:

Amours gibiers!
Aux jours de givre,
Rêver sans livre
Dans les terriers
Chauds de fumier!²⁵⁵

Jan, Dirk and Old Prijck in Larkin’s poem are similarly contented without books and erudition – in “bestial peace”. With this in mind, it becomes even more haunting to see that Mr Bleaney’s frigid room that has “no room for books” is far removed from any kind of peace, warmth or cosiness. Similarly, the “good books” of “Poetry of Departures” make no home.

But there is more to Larkin’s card-players than just a passing resemblance to Laforguean sentiments. Often overlooked or dismissed as one of “the notorious bachelor poems”²⁵⁶, “The Card-Players” with its nods to French Symbolism and the

²⁵³ “Red forests thresh/Torrents so fresh”

²⁵⁴ “Paris gripped in sails, and showily rolling r’s”

²⁵⁵ “Small-game affairs!/On days of frost,/To dream, books lost,/In burrows like theirs,/Dung-warm in pairs!”

²⁵⁶ Osborne 2008, p. 168

curious nature of the farcical Dutch genre piece is paradoxically one of the few poems in Larkin's *oeuvre* that sketches an anthropological place in Augé's sense, a proper ground with an effortless, elemental community. Booth's depiction of a "mutely uncommunicative male fellowship [...] in a brutal rejection of domestic refinement"²⁵⁷ is not at the centre of the poem. Indeed, the community depicted is not even necessarily exclusively male: next to Jan, Dirk and Old Prijck we encounter an unspecified "Someone". If we take it that Larkin took the inspiration for "The Card-Players" from an illustrated book on the Flemish painter Brouwer it is interesting to see that in quite a few of Brouwer's paintings detailing peasant scenes at an inn, there is a female figure hidden in the shadows of the background. At the centre of Larkin's poem is an actual, anthropological community with a chthonic quality that is hardly ever present in any other of Larkin's poems.

With that in mind I would like to argue that "The Card-Players" is a poetic extrapolation of the kind of anthropological place that Larkin hints at in his correspondence with Monica Jones. Monica Jones and Larkin shared a love for the anthropomorphic animal world of Beatrix Potter. After Monica had given him a copy of *The Tale of Johnny Town-Mouse* in 1952, a delighted Larkin writes: "The real hero of *J. Townmouse* charms me completely. He is quite my kind of person." and defends his liking after some teasing by Patsy Strang: "Of course I'm not going to *stop* reading Potter".²⁵⁸ Larkin commonly addresses Monica as rabbit, bunny, bun or "dearest of burrow-dwellers"²⁵⁹ which indicates an underlying awareness of the safety of a burrow – or a "lamplit cave". I do not want to suggest that "The Card-Players" is a "Monica"-poem even though its temporal proximity to "Poem about Oxford" with its dedication to

²⁵⁷ Booth 2005, p. 167

²⁵⁸ *LM*, p. 94

²⁵⁹ *LM*, p. 97

Monica is undebatable; I would merely like to draw attention to the fact that in his personal correspondence, Larkin has already formed an idea of the cosiness and warmth of burrow and cave. In this context, the Laforguean exclamation of “The secret, bestial peace!” is not bestial in a brutal, perverse way, but bestial in an earthy, animal sense.

In a previous chapter I have remarked how Larkin's speaker in “Here” creates the sense of blissful non-place at the edge of the water - his ultimate version of (un-)attainable transcendence. If “The Card-Players” really expresses a diametrically opposed “chthonic rather than a celestial version of transcendence”²⁶⁰ with a rare appreciation of community and place, then these altogether different versions of transcendence merit a closer look. Interestingly, a closer look at the celestial version of transcendence in poems like “Here” and “High Windows” leads us back to Symbolist concepts. Both poems are drenched in brilliant sunshine: the speaker in “Here” passes by the “shining, gull-marked mud” and comes to “facing the sun” while the speaker in “High Windows” ponders upon “sun-comprehending glass”. On the other side of the “High Windows” “deep blue air” beckons and in “Here” there is the “bluish neutral distance”. Strikingly, Baudelaire's prose poem “Confiteor de l'artiste” exactly shares Larkin's sentiment at the end of “Here”: “Grand délice que celui de noyer son regard dans l'immensité du ciel et de la mer! Solitude, silence, incomparable chasteté de l'azur !”²⁶¹ but stops short in adopting the sudden mood change: “Et maintenant la profondeur du ciel me consterne ; sa limpidité m'exaspère.”²⁶² Both Mallarmé and Baudelaire were ambassadors of the *azur*. “In the poetry of the later nineteenth and early twentieth century, the blue sky comes to stand for a distant and indifferent domain

²⁶⁰ Booth, “The Card-Players” in: Michael Hanke (ed.), *Fourteen English Sonnets*, WVT, Trier, 2007, p. 176

²⁶¹ “What greater delight than to submerge the eye in the immensity of sky and sea! Solitude, silence, incomparable chaste blue!”, Sorrell 2010, p. 7 – the following translations are all taken from Sorrell's volume

²⁶² “Now the unending sky disconcerts me; its clarity is exasperating.”

which cannot be reached by man.”²⁶³ In Larkin, the beyond remains “out of reach”; “the deep blue air [...] shows/Nothing” in exactly the same way as Baudelaire calls the sky “ironique et cruellement bleu” in “Le Cygne” and Mallarmé exclaims “Le ciel est mort” in his “L’Azur”.

If the blue sky hints at transcendence it is juxtaposed by the “starlessness above” in “The Card-Players”. It is neither the depressing brightness of the moon as in “Sad Steps” nor mere darkness. Jan van Hogspeuw takes all menace out of the darkness as he carelessly “pisses at the dark”. The preposition “at” in this context is telling: Jan not only pisses *in* the dark, he pisses *at* the dark as if to defy the menace it may potentially hold.

The starlessness is neither on the other side of the window as the moon is in “Sad Steps” or the “deep blue air” is in “High Windows”, it is – typically for Larkin – on the other side of a door. Untypically for Larkin, however, the door in “The Card-Players” is ajar; Jan does not have to open it before he starts urinating. While in Larkin there is often a pronounced difference and a lack of contact between the inside and the outside world, often emphasized by closed (and occasionally open), doors, “The Card-Players” casually suspends this border. When in “Here” the crowds “push through plate-glass swing doors to their desire” or the speaker in “Best Society” locks his door, “The Card-Players” does not even mention explicitly that there is an open door. Much like the Flemish style of painting it takes as its blueprint, the reader casually notes that the door is open just because Jan van Hogspeuw does not have to go through the ordeal of opening it before relieving himself. If we suppose that Larkin adopts the concept of “The Card-Players” from the paintings by the Flemish artist Brouwer²⁶⁴, it is not

²⁶³ W.J. Lillyman, “The Blue Sky: A Recurrent Symbol” in: *Comparative Literature*, Vol. 21, No. 2, Spring, 1969, p. 122

²⁶⁴ *LM*, p.348

without significance that a great number of Brouwer's "peasant"-paintings feature an open door somewhere in the background. "The Card-Players" thus might be one of the few poems in Larkin's *oeuvre* in which inside and outside coexist instead of being mutually exclusive. The final exclamation "Rain, wind and fire!" distills this impression as it enumerates not only the outside elements rain and wind, but also the fire inside. These combined elements of the outer natural world and the inner human – no less natural! – world together make for "The secret, bestial peace!" Incidentally, I still tend to read 'secret, bestial *place*' when casually skimming the poem. But how nicely this misreading corresponds to the idea of anthropological place!

Interestingly, Larkin's "Best Society" thus turns into a direct companion piece to "The Card-Players". In "Best Society", the speaker sketches his situation:

I lock my door.
The gas-fire breathes.
The wind outside
Ushers in evening rain. Once more
Uncontradicting solitude
Supports me on its giant palm.

In "The Card-Players", the door is open. The fire in the "lamplit cave" burns peacefully and lights up Old Prijck's "skull face". This kind of actual fire – as opposed to the personified artificiality of the gas-fire in "Best Society" – is soothingly warm and has nothing of the underlying menace of the fire breathing, almost hissing, into a locked room, while the "huge fire" in the unpublished "None of the books have time" is once more a characteristic of blissful, "selfish" place. The elemental community in "The

Larkin writes to Monica Jones in 1965: "Agitation on the part of the acquisition dept for the return of Adriaen Brouwer has led me to look at it again – fine stuff: a comforting world of its own – you are a great fat oaf, three quarters drunk, sitting on a bench with a jug of beer in your hand, surrounded by cronies as ugly and disgusting as yourself. You are all smoking clay pipes: there's a good fire in the hearth. One man is flat out on the floor, having spewed (dogs are licking it up), another is pissing out of the back door. The candlelight shows patched clothes, broken cupboards: outside is wind, mud, winter. *But you are all right.*" The painting by Brouwer, admired in an art book, has obviously impressed itself on Larkin's imagination. The fact that he shares this fundamentally personal feeling of "being all right" and positive identification with the "cronies" in the painting with Monica furthermore highlights the significance of the couples' shared and imagined anthropological place.

Card-Players” dispenses with this potential selfishness.

In “Best Society” the wind “Ushers in evening rain”; in “The Card-Players” the wind remains in the trees above the “lamplit cave” in the same way that the rain remains “Outside”. When in “Best Society” solitude equals peace and brings out the true nature of the speaker behind a locked door, then “The Card-Players” finds peace in exactly the mute fellowship, the unperturbed intimacy, the community of the characters. Indeed, while the first person pronoun singular in “Best Society” is prevalent, there is not one pronoun in “The Card-Players”. Everyone in the room, even the unspecified “someone” in a way, is addressed by name creating an intimate, warm atmosphere – all this despite the farce of the actual names.

“The Card-Players” then, not only works as a reverse companionpiece to “Best Society”, but also takes up ideas expressed in “Vers de Société”. Here again “The gas-fire breathes” and “the trees are darkly swayed”. It seems as if the passive form used in “the trees are darkly swayed” corresponds to the helpless desire for social connections while the active form of the “trees/Clash in surrounding starlessness” are an expression of the unselfconscious community in “The Card-Players”. This community is tellingly established in a “lamplit cave” while in “Vers de Société” “sitting by a lamp more often brings/Not peace, but other things.” Interestingly, Laforgue uses “la clarté paisible de la lampe” (“the lamp’s clear and *peaceful* light” [emphasis mine]) in his “Nocturne”. In “Vers de Société” the social ordeal of listening to “the drivel of some bitch” and feigning interest is replaced by the honesty of the croaking, belching and snoring in “The Card-Players”. There is no pretense in this social environment. Communication in “The Card-Players” is reduced to the minimum: the blissful place here is strikingly as “untalkative” as the blissful non-place in “Here”. It seems as if Larkin reviews his ideas of solitude and social strains in “The Card-Players” by creating a farcical community.

On a second reading, however, the farcical community has much more to offer – actual, secret, bestial peace – than the civilized community in “Vers de Société”. In “Livings II”, the speaker rejects exactly the “Fires in humped inns” that make “The Card-Players” so homely. Interestingly, the exclamation “(O loose moth world)” in “Livings II” is once more a Laforguean echo.

In “The Card-Players” it is perhaps the almost Brechtian alienation effect of the Dutch genre piece with Larkin’s ridiculous double-Dutch and nods to French Symbolism that allow the poet to contemplate an entirely different concept of place and community. Larkin’s wry, desillusioned speaker is noticeably absent from this poem. There is no distance between the reader and the scene observed. Rain, wind and fire hit the reader as directly as belches and farts. The reader is thus drawn into the community, towards the fire. “Show Saturday” with a similarly absent speaker on a “Grey day”, in comparison, fails to incorporate the reader and leaves him with an empty sense of a community both reader and speaker can never be part of.

Trengrove-Jones sketches how the language of the Polish airgirl in Larkin’s 1944 poem “Like the trains beat” “remains ‘meaningless’” because it is not translated but turned “into a symbol of a desired poetic [that] still effectively excludes her language from the poetic.”²⁶⁵ “The Card-Players” equally remain mute; untalkative throughout the poem, but they nonetheless remain essentially *foreign*, i.e. un-English. It is exactly this quality which distinguishes the atmosphere in “The Card-Players” so clearly from “Show Saturday”. Suddenly, *strangeness makes sense*. “Show Saturday” cannot successfully create a community because it is recognizably *English*. If Larkin finds in the foreignness of language or culture “the Romantic conviction of the ‘strangeness’ of

²⁶⁵ Trengrove-Jones 1992, p. 59

poetic language”²⁶⁶ it is no surprise that “The Card-Players” is more immediate, more specific and more universal than “Show Saturday”. It is Larkin’s play with Dutch derivations and the (French) Symbolism of “Wet century-wide trees/Clash in surrounding starlessness above/This lamplit cave” and the direct approach that rids the poem of a potentially condescending speaker that makes “The Card-Players” one of Larkin’s most universal poems. Paradoxically, the poet achieves this by introducing a very specific (as in specified) community and place. If Larkin no longer “Englishes” the poem, he takes the opportunity to incorporate French (symbolist) components in order to write a poem that sounds “different from himself”. Larkin uses the European while remaining “true to his belief in the unknowability of the Other”²⁶⁷ – the characters in “The Card-Players” do not have a language, nor require a translation. I have suggested calling this technique “Europeanising”, but it is less a European approximation than a defamiliarizing of the scene.

The strangeness of “The Card-Players” may indeed be one of the reasons why it tends to be overlooked in critical evaluations of Larkin’s work: because it is atypical. It sounds like a different poet. In this case, we can easily adopt Trengrove-Jones’s conclusion: “the opportunism that informs the exercise of linguistic [cultural] appropriationism hardly suggests that ‘foreign languages are irrelevant’.”²⁶⁸ In keeping with the contradictory nature of his attitude towards foreign poetry it is no surprise that Larkin should counter the transcendental community of “The Card-Players” with the solitary lighthouse-keeper in “Livings II” who lays out “divining-cards” for himself alone less than a year later.

The “lamplit cave” in “The Card-Players” must be the only positively connotated,

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 59

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 59

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 59

anthropological place in Larkin's *oeuvre*. Larkin's "The little lives of earth and form" underlines the attraction of the cave: "We hanker for the homeliness/Of den, and hole, and set." Additionally, as well as "The little lives...", "The Card-Players" has the underlying, intimate "Monica"-connection as its background as well as an idea of the actual "proper ground" in which every protagonist is entirely himself for the very first time. Rain, wind and fire, ale, food ("ham-hung rafters") and love ("songs [...] about love", "the queen of hearts") form the simple parameters of this ideal community.

Perhaps it is no coincidence that both "Here" with its "shining gull-marked mud" and "the deep mud lane" in "The Card-Players" make chthonic references while referring to different versions of transcendence. It is Larkin's versatility that allows him – for once – to find transcendence in a community of – essentially – clowns. In Laforgue's words:

And I'm home, my space!
My place,
Of birth, hearth, spot,
It's All. I act with good grace;
I'm not a bad lot."²⁶⁹

"The Card-Players" thus becomes the climax of Larkin's negotiation of French Symbolist influences. Starting out in 1943 with the more or less direct "Englising" of Baudelaire's "Femmes Damnées", the idea of an approximation of French into English culture becomes fainter and fainter throughout Larkin's engagement with French sources. "Sympathy in White Major" deliberately references Gautier while the Laforguean echoes in "Sad Steps" are visible to those in the know while simultaneously abandoning the mere "Englising" of Larkin's influences. "The Card-Players", then, cleverly embraces Symbolist characteristics and Flemish painting to arrive at a conclusion that is all the more universal for its human specificity. Larkin has clearly digested the original poem(s) in his imagination and used these to produce a different,

²⁶⁹ Laforgue 2001, p. 229

strange poem.

The direct Laforguean echoes we have detected point towards yet another misconception about Larkin's work. When Osborne says of Laforgue: "Larkin followed Eliot's lead in raiding the French precursor"²⁷⁰ he not only suggests that Larkin followed Eliot's example but also that Laforgue's influence on Larkin was mediated. We have seen that this is hardly the case. Whether Larkin was inspired by Eliot – who even got married in the same church as Laforgue²⁷¹ – to read Laforgue can only be speculated. Risking a closer look underlines that both poets deal differently with their fascination for Laforgue. Returning to Laforgue's "L'Hiver qui vient" for the moment might clarify how both poets "raided" the work of the French poet in their own way. We have seen how Larkin uses Laforguean echoes of moon and clouds in "Sad Steps" and momentarily adopts the French poet's fondness for exclamations.

As Dale underlines, Laforgue's influence on Eliot is – just as on Larkin – only to be seen as an echo and no direct "lift". However, Eliot's "Prufrock" makes use of the chorus "In the room the women come and go/Talking of Michelangelo." in the same way as the exclamation ending on "...et hallili!" recurs in "L'Hiver qui vient". Indeed, Laforgue makes repeated use of the chorus throughout his *oeuvre*. While wind, clouds and moon appear in both Larkin and Laforgue, Eliot seems to have taken to Laforgue's descriptions of society. In "L'Hiver qui vient" "the suburbs looking like the sea" ("l'océan de toitures des faubourgs") (an interesting image in connection to the ending of "Prufrock") set the scene for "Lamps, engravings, petit-fours and tea" ("Lampes, estampes, thé, petit-fours"), the speaker in "Prufrock" is stuck between "tea and cakes and ices" and "the cups, the marmalade, the tea". In "Prufrock" there are "voices dying

²⁷⁰ Osborne 2008, p. 58

²⁷¹ compare Alfredo Rodríguez López-Vázquez, "Hamlet, Laforgue, and Joyce" in: *Papers on Joyce 2*, 1996, p. 97

with a dying fall/Beneath the music from a farther room”; in “L’Hiver qui vient” one speculates what “The health figures speak/And papers tabulate” “beyond the pianos”. These small instances alone underline how differently Eliot and Larkin approach Laforgue.

The music of pianos permeates Laforgue as much as Eliot. Laforgue writes his “Complainte des pianos qu’on entend dans les quartiers aisés” (“Complaint of Pianos heard in the plushy Quarters”) and his “Complainte de l’orgue de barbarie” (“Complaint of the Barrel-Organ”). “XII Dimanche” equally complains about “that piano [...]/That’s never going to stop dead” (“Oh! Ce piano, ce cher piano,/Qui jamais, jamais ne s’arrête”). In Eliot, apart from the piano heard in Prufrock, there is the Chopin and the “street-piano, mechanical and tired” in “Portrait of a Lady” and the typist’s gramophone in *The Waste Land*. Dale notes Eliot’s use of the piano, but qualifies this in relation to Laforgue: “Eliot also makes reference to pianos but they are not for him so ubiquitous, nor do they represent as for Laforgue the adolescent girl’s unwitting assumption into the generation game [as in “Complaintes des pianos...”].”²⁷² All that is left in Larkin is “The music in the piano stool” in “Home is so Sad”.

Laforgue’s imagery not only permeates Larkin’s work. Eliot’s “Rhapsody on a Windy Night” picks up Laforgue’s wind-imagery in the title; within the poem, however, the wind is only present in the sputtering street-lamps. The French line on the moon “La lune ne garde aucune rancune” appears as a direct lift from Laforgue; only it is not. But while Larkin’s moon stays in tune with Laforgue’s in a wind-tousled night sky, Eliot’s moon in “Conversation Galante” becomes the object of smalltalk: “Our sentimental friend the moon!” and is completely disenchanted as it is likened to “Prester John’s balloon” and “an old battered lantern”. While Larkin’s “Sad Steps” still endorses the

²⁷² Dale 2001, p. 17

otherworldly nature of the moon that Laforgue calls upon, Eliot's moon in "Rhapsody on a Windy Night" is personified, "alone/With all the old nocturnal smells" and merely serves as a vehicle to transport memories on "the street/Held in a lunar synthesis" while in conversation with street-lamps. Strikingly, one of Larkin's early poems from 1939 not only references "Street-Lamps" and "windy streets" but also makes use of another element typical for Eliot. When in "Prufrock" fog and smoke are likened to a cat rubbing its back and muzzle on the window panes and the evening similarly stretches out on the floor, in Larkin the "night slinks, like a puma, down the sky".

"Street-Lamps" is an early example which we can safely classify as 'young Philip still finding his voice'. Looking at the Laforgue echoes in Eliot and mature Larkin, however, hardens the impression that Larkin took to the 'natural' in Laforgue – clouds, wind, sky – while Eliot prefers the 'social' Laforgue. In Eliot even the moon plays a social role; either as the subject of talk or the keeper of faded social memories.

Much like Eliot after him, Laforgue is a "poet of the city"²⁷³, a Parisian poet in the tradition of the *flâneur* as established by Baudelaire a few years earlier. In his essay "The Painter of Modern Life" from 1863 Baudelaire sketches the artistic man: "His passion and his profession is to merge with the crowd."²⁷⁴ Laforgue wanders through the Parisian crowds throughout his complaints; Eliot's speakers are part of social occasions. The speaker in "Prufrock" has "measured out [his] life with coffee spoons", in "Portrait of a Lady" the female speaker assures that she "shall sit here, serving tea to friends." while in "The Burial of the Dead" in *The Waste Land* the speaker is almost carried away by the crowd that "flowed over London Bridge". As we have seen in the previous chapters, Larkin does not have this. If his speakers encounter a crowd, they tend to shy away from it unless scared solitude is the worse option as in "Vers de Société". As

²⁷³ Laforgue 2001, p. 13

²⁷⁴ Quoted in: Tester 1994, p. 2

flâneurs both Laforgue and Eliot would be able to be swept away as enthusiastically as Baudelaire describes it:

The man who loves to lose himself in a crowd enjoys feverish delights that the egoist locked up in himself as in a box, and the slothful man like a mollusk in his shell, will be eternally deprived of.²⁷⁵

The image of the egoist locked up in a box becomes especially striking in the Larkin context. Solitary bliss - if it is possible at all - for Larkin is the image of the “padlocked cube of light” in “Dry-Point” or the locked (attic?) room in “Best Society”. It is only later that Larkin’s places of bliss are either outside as in “Here” or in a room open to the elements as in “The Card-Players”. Significantly in this context, the speaker in “Here” rushes past the “cut-price crowd” that is “urban, yet simple” instead of experiencing the Baudelairean “feverish delights” in joining them. Larkin’s speaker in “The Whitsun Weddings” is far from “going home” to the metropolis London. He never sets foot on the platform; never merges with the wedding parties. Larkin does not walk for the elation of the “relentless bathing in multitude”. He is not the “hero of modern life [...] who lives in the public spaces of the city”²⁷⁶ as Baudelaire characterises the *flâneur*. Larkin catches his trains and happily slides closed the door of his compartment. He can neither share Laforgue’s sentiment of “J’aurai passé ma vie le long de quais/À faillir m’embarquer”²⁷⁷ nor the almost romantic “Oh, qu’ils sont pittoresques les trains manqués!”²⁷⁸ from “X” in the *Derniers Vers*. Eliot in *The Waste Land* is far from hurrying past the crowd. His speaker on London Bridge stands, watches and even singles out “Stetson” to address. Larkin’s speaker, as opposed to Laforgue’s or Eliot’s, is a far cry from “the man who is only at home existentially when he is not at home

²⁷⁵ Tester 1994, p. 2

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 5

²⁷⁷ “I have passed my life, daylight and dark,/On platforms failing to embark”

²⁷⁸ “Oh, how picturesque the missed trains look!”

physically”²⁷⁹ as Baudelaire claims of the *flâneur*. The problem with Larkin’s speakers is that they are – willingly or unwillingly – stuck in non-places that do not remotely offer the option of home. Laforgue is rooted in Paris; Eliot’s place is metropolitan; Larkin rarely has a “proper ground”.

Walter Benjamin notes in his essay on Baudelaire how the *flâneur* “sucht sich sein Asyl in der Menge”.²⁸⁰ Interestingly, Benjamin sketches the city as “Phantasmagorie” that can be both at the same time, open landscape or intimate private room. The phantasmagoric private room the city offers to the *flâneur* in Benjamin is the direct opposite of the actual room, the *flâneur*’s home: “Wie ein asketisches Tier streicht er durch unbekannte Viertel, bis er in tiefster Erschöpfung auf seinem Zimmer, das ihn befremdet [...], zusammensinkt.”²⁸¹ Benjamin notes the *flâneur*’s alienation in his actual home. Mr Bleaney’s successor as a tenant in Larkin’s poem of the same name feels this alienation taking stock of bleak surroundings in his “one hired box”: the fusty “bed, upright chair, sixty watt bulb”. The same disillusioned stock taken of a “home” that almost appears as if in inverted commas, takes place in the ellipses “Home Is So Sad”: “the pictures and the cutlery./The music in the piano stool. That vase.” In “Home Is So Sad”, there is not even the remotest idea of an outside. There is no view and no city, no room for the *flâneur*’s potentially redeeming work. In “Mr Bleaney” there is at least the view from the window onto “a strip of building land,/Tussocky, littered.” This short perspective, however, has nothing in common with the “Magnetismus der nächsten Straßenecke, einer fernen Masse Laubes, eines Straßennamens”²⁸² that drive the *flâneur* to keep on walking.

²⁷⁹ Tester 1994, p. 2

²⁸⁰ Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. I, Rolf Tiedemann (ed.), Suhrkamp Verlag, Berlin, 1892, p. 54 – “the flaneur is looking for a refuge within the crowd“ [translations mine]

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 525 – “the flaneur roams through unknown quarters as an ascetic beast until he collapses in his room that alienates him”

²⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 525 – “the magnetism of the next corner, of a heap of leaves, of a street name”

The fundamental difference between the French *flâneur* at the end of the 19th century and Larkin's alienated speakers, however, lies in the perspective. The *flâneur* – Eliot's speakers do that, too – tends to look *in* in a mild voyeuristic stance while Larkin's speakers usually look *out*. We have seen the direction of the gaze in “Mr Bleaney”, the speaker in “High Windows” is in the room looking out, the train travellers in “I Remember, I Remember” and “The Whitsun Weddings” “squint” out of train windows; there is a chance in “The Building” to “Look down at the yard”. If they are looking out of the window, Larkin's speakers' view is generally one of short perspectives. “Reference Back” explicitly notes: “We are not suited to the long perspectives.” Larkin's speakers hardly share Baudelaire's elation in *Le Spleen de Paris*: “Il n'est pas d'objet plus profond, plus mystérieuse, plus fécond, plus ténébreuse, plus éblouissant qu'une fenêtre éclairée d'une chandelle.”²⁸³

Larkin's speakers are mostly *in* the room – as opposed to looking in from the outside – missing what Benjamin calls the “Kolportagephänomen des Raumes”. This phenomenon is “die grundlegende Erfahrung des Flâneurs. [...] Der Raum blinzelt den Flâneur an: Nun, was mag sich in mir wohl zugetragen haben?”²⁸⁴ Larkin's rooms do not tend to communicate with his speakers; even when in a hotel room as in “Friday Night in the Royal Station Hotel” there is no thought of who else might have spent a night in that very room.

Interestingly, Benjamin cites non-places in Augé's sense as the perfect playground for the *flâneur*: “Bahnhöfe, Ausstellungshallen, Warenhäuser [...] haben sämtliche kollektive Anliegen zu ihrem Gegenstande. Von diesen Konstruktionen [...] fühlt sich

²⁸³ Benjamin 1892, p. 548 – “there is no object deeper, more mysterious, more fruitful, darker and more fulminant than a window lighted by a single candle” [translation mine]

²⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 527 – “the colportage of the room as the flâneur's basic experience [...]. The room winks at the flâneur: Well, what might have happened here?”

der Flâneur angezogen.”²⁸⁵ Sketching the “Dialektik der flanerie” (“the dialectics of flanerie”), Benjamin notes how “der Mann der Menge” (“the man of the crowd”) is exposed as someone special within a crowd, but at the same time finds total invisibility and security in the crowd’s anonymity. Larkin’s speakers do not have this. They are always removed from a crowd – except for the chthonic community presented in “The Card-Players” – tending to their anonymity in the privacy of their own room, lighthouse, attic. Larkin writes to Monica Jones in 1966: “I took a walk yesterday along the Avenues – between 4&5, dusk, dirty snow, Victorian houses, silence, lighted interiors. Fascinating!”²⁸⁶ Larkin himself perhaps accepts Laforgue’s and Baudelaire’s invitation to be a *flâneur*, his speakers, however, cannot share this fascination for the rooms of others.

If Laforgue, as Arthur Symons puts it in *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, is “terribly conscious of daily life, cannot omit, mentally, a single hour of the day”²⁸⁷, then both Larkin and Eliot write in the vein of Laforgue. “Prufrock” stretches from the morning’s “toast and tea” to the cat-imagery of afternoon and evening “After the sunsets”. After an explicit trip to the bathroom Larkin’s speaker in “Sad Steps” pauses to stare at the moon. Eliot’s and Larkin’s speakers as well as Laforgue’s take the reader with them wherever they go. When Laforgue gives in to “self-deprecation and irony”²⁸⁸ Eliot’s and Larkin’s speakers follow not far behind. “Prufrock” sketches himself as the tragically-comic Polonius. His (Laforguean?) exclamation “No! I’m not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be” is perhaps an echo of Laforgue’s “I’m not at all ‘that strapping fellow’ nor The Superb!” (“Je ne suis point “ce gaillard-là” ni Le Superbe!”) from

²⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 569 “train stations, exhibition halls, department stores [...] deal with all collective concerns. The flâneur is attracted to these constructions.”

²⁸⁶ *LM*, p. 357

²⁸⁷ Arthur Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, E.P. Dutton and Company, New York, 1919, p. 59

²⁸⁸ John J. Soldo, “T.S. Eliot and Jules Laforgue“ in: *American Literature*, Vol. 55, No. 2, May, 1983, p. 148

Laforogue's "Pierrots" – "Almost, at time, the Fool". The French pierrot is the fool. It is undebatable that Shakespeare's *Hamlet* offers itself as a rich literary source but it is striking that Laforogue again and again alludes to the Prince of Denmark: in his version of *Hamlet* he – according to some sources – sets the ground for what Joyce should later make of the interior monologue.²⁸⁹ Laforogue's "Maniaque" in his *Des Fleurs de bonne volonté* starts with a quotation by Polonius – in English. The same is true for the short piece of dialogue between Ophelia and Hamlet which precedes "VII Aquarelle en cinq minutes"; "VIII Romance", "XVI Dimanches" and "XXVI Ballade" all quote from *Hamlet*. "Laforogue everywhere evokes Hamlet to suggest the madness of the speaker, his near-sadistic tormenting of the lady, and his projection onto her of his own psychological anxieties about women."²⁹⁰ It is quite obvious that Eliot takes this sentiment into his "Conversation Galante" in which the speaker ironically comments on the lady's verbiage: "Oh no, it is I who am inane." and "You, madam, are the eternal humorist". Laforogue speaks of "l'exile des causeries" ("exile of small-talk") in "Complainte de certains ennuis". It is exactly this exile that Larkin's speaker dreads in "Vers de Société". It becomes clear that both Eliot and Larkin have certainly taken pages out of Laforogue's book, but their different weighting of individual aspects from Laforogue seems to emphasize Laforogue's direct influence on Larkin. The evidence here does not support a Laforoguean influence mediated by Eliot.

In the introduction to his translations of Laforogue Dale stresses that the French "found, and still find to some extent, an unFrenchness in his [Laforogue's] work, which reveals the poet as an anglophile with annoying habits like quoting from *Hamlet*."²⁹¹ Shakespeare's Danish prince appears again and again in Eliot, but all that remains of

²⁸⁹ Compare: Alfredo Rodríguez López-Vázquez 1996, pp. 97-102

²⁹⁰ Michele Hanoosh, review of *Jules Laforogue and Poetic Innovation* by Anne Holmes, in: *Modern Philology*, Vol. 93, No. 3, Feb 1996, p. 405

²⁹¹ Laforogue 2001, p. 9

Hamlet in Larkin's *oeuvre* is the title of *The Less Deceived* and the ironic signing off of the "Letter to a Friend about Girls" – "Horatio". What Larkin shares with both Laforgue and Eliot is the "disillusioned smile"²⁹² and – to a certain extent, Hamlet's difficulties with girls. In tune with Larkin's sentiment, Laforgue in "Advertissement" exclaims: "Or, pas le coer de me marier,/Étant, moi, au fond, trop méprisable!/Et elles, pas assez intraitables!"²⁹³ However, this brief example exposes Laforgue's wry, ironic tone a good deal lighter and less bitter than that of Larkin's almost resigned speakers.

What is striking about Dale's comment is not so much the *Hamlet*-connection that Laforgue repeatedly incorporates. It is the small detail of Laforgue's perceived anglophilia. It is perhaps Laforgue's anglophile nature which made his poetry so readily available for Eliot and Larkin. If Larkin was following his desire to write as a different poet from himself, then this desire would have been considerably easier to attain if the foreign poet in question is different, *but not quite so different*, from oneself. This is perhaps the reason why Laforguean echoes re-appear time and time again in Larkin's poetry while his negotiation of Verlaine, Baudelaire and Gautier is restricted to individual poems or mere ideas of a certain poetic.

Looking back to the diametrically opposed evaluations of Paris and France at the beginning of the chapter it thus comes as no surprise that Larkin's versatility confounds critics like Rawson who have Larkin's speakers firmly placed in one cultural and literary pigeonhole and thus have little patience with everything that rattles this perception. In the letters detailing Paris and France Larkin adopts different voices to say different things. These voices are the same ones that surface in his poetry. Just because Larkin is intensely English in one poem it does not mean that he cannot be culturally

²⁹² The phrase is taken from an early review of Eliot's *The Waste Land* in the *Times Literary Supplement*, Sept 20th, 1923, quoted in: *T.S. Eliot The Waste Land*, C.B. Cox and Arnold Hinchcliffe (eds.), Macmillan, London, 1968, p. 32

²⁹³ "Well, had no heart for marriage, me:/Being of too despicable stuff!/Girls not intractable enough!"

open and even universal in the next – as the brief comparison of “Show Saturday” and “The-Cardplayers” underlines. The analysis of his French influences emphasizes Larkin’s poetic skill and eradicates the idea of the gruff, monolingual Larkin for good. The “Englishing” of certain French models hints at a deeper engagement with the cultural Other. In “The Card-Players” this cultural Other becomes so specific, so unEnglish that it appears as universal. “The Card-Players” – though often overlooked or discarded as irrelevant– thus becomes one of Larkin’s most successful poems. Its untypicality only highlights Larkin’s fascinating engagement with foreign literary models: “the great thing is not to be different from other people, but to be different from yourself.”²⁹⁴

²⁹⁴ Quoted in: David Timms, *Philip Larkin*, Oliver and Boyd, Edinburgh, 1973, p. 121

Chapter 5

'My chief expectancy centres on these records that are reputedly on their way from Yankland': Larkin and Jazz

Writing to B.C. Bloomfield in 1985 Larkin is characteristically flippant about Dorothy J. Farnan's novel *Auden in Love* engaging in a disgruntled argument about Americans and their language: "Why do yanks say blow when they mean suck? And arse when they mean cunt? Talk about separated by a common language..."²⁹⁵ Larkin's associations with America are far from favourable. When John Wain returns from his five month trip to the USA, Larkin writes "I dread America for unknown germs, Puerto Rican stabbings etc."²⁹⁶ In another letter to Conquest Larkin discusses Kingsley Amis's time in America: "I'm sure his [Amis's] view of Yankland is more sympathetic than mine: he wouldn't notice the noise and the lack of draught beer. And I can't believe the people are less boring than the people here."²⁹⁷ Striking a familiar pose, Larkin enumerates prejudices and clichés: America is the place of watery beer, noise and Latino violence. On the other hand: caught in the amorous triangle between Monica Jones and Maeve Brennan in 1966, America also features as a welcome escape: "Feel it would be a good time to have a year in USA."²⁹⁸ Indeed, the US features prominently in Larkin's imagination whenever a personal situation threatens to overwhelm him. Fed up with his mother's moods and her neediness Larkin complains to Monica fantasizing:

²⁹⁵ *SL*, p.735

²⁹⁶ *SL*, p. 306

²⁹⁷ *SL*, p. 306

²⁹⁸ *SL*, p. 382

“Visions of years in America, jobs in Australia swim before my eyes.” He exaggerates wildly: “Everyone should be forcibly transplanted from their family at the age of three”²⁹⁹, setting up the idea of abroad as the place where one is freed from all family and relationship ties; abroad as a dream place in contrast to home. Taking this even further, Larkin once confided in Monica: “if I had the courage I wd emigrate.”³⁰⁰ A visit to America was on the cards in October 1957 when Monica’s Head of Department suggested she might take up a Visiting Lectureship in New York.³⁰¹ But as it meant either definite, explicit commitment to Monica on Larkin’s part or ending the relationship Monica chose not to go.

After having been approached by the University of Cincinnati in 1959 himself – “Can’t help being flattered, but am refusing, of course”³⁰² – Larkin’s refusal to visit the University of Connecticut in 1962 was considerably less confident: “I’ve said no, though whether it’s wise being so negative I don’t know. [...] On the other hand, I just don’t see myself lecturing there, do you, if I don’t lecture here. It wd give me a nervous breakdown.”³⁰³ Playing into this refusal is Larkin’s lack of self-confidence. It is not so much the going abroad that worries him as proving unworthy of academic honours. Larkin’s college friends Kingsley Amis, John Wain and Robert Conquest had all gone abroad to follow various academic callings:

They are all gone into the world of light,
Kingsley and John and Bob;
I suppose in some way I can’t be as bright,
Not getting myself a job.

For me the shops marked BOOKS&MAGAZINES,
For me the gassy beer,
The trolley-bus at ten past nine, the Deans –

²⁹⁹ *LM*, p. 383

³⁰⁰ *LM*, p. 387

³⁰¹ Compare *LM*, pp. 228-230

³⁰² *LM*, p. 248

³⁰³ *LM*, p. 196

I'm staying here.³⁰⁴

The little poem written to Conquest exposes a certain jealousy mingled with self-deprecation and a humorous sense of inadequacy on Larkin's part. Larkin's comment to Conquest in 1957 "I see strip-tease has been made illegal in US – no point in going now"³⁰⁵ is similarly self-deprecating, relegating thoughts about the USA to the strictly and humorously private sphere. However, Larkin's criticism of the American business of "being a poet", lecturing about the "kind of poetry that needed elucidation"³⁰⁶ and "culture-mongering activities" of the likes of Pound and Eliot remains scathing. Summing up his 1976 speech accepting the Shakespeare Prize in Hamburg to Conquest, Larkin writes that it was "devoted to the theme of how giving talks and readings and generally living the life of Riley sods you up as a poet".³⁰⁷ "Naturally the Foundation Will Bear Your Expenses" and "Posterity" criticize the American literary circuit conducted by "continent-hopping craps"³⁰⁸ and "salaried explainers of poetry".³⁰⁹ Larkin's literary dream of America remains ambiguous. Temptation and rejection mingle: "I should be unwilling to go to *work* in US, partly because they work you hard, partly for fear of being found out as No Good."³¹⁰

Masking his insecurity, Larkin sketches a personal America that looks suspiciously like Hull: "I am really tempted to go and see if, for me, US wd be full of fishy winds, trolley buses, girls like plethoric sausages etc."³¹¹ Indeed, Larkin acknowledges personal versions of America. Writing to Conquest shortly after his departure to Buffalo, Larkin states: "I'm glad to hear you are safely arrived & busy creating your

³⁰⁴ *SL*, p. 307

³⁰⁵ *SL*, p. 277

³⁰⁶ Motion 1993, p. 345

³⁰⁷ *SL*, p. 541

³⁰⁸ *SL*, p. 330

³⁰⁹ *SL*, p. 307

³¹⁰ *LM*, p. 229; one should probably take into account that this statement might have been formulated carefully in order to discourage Monica Jones from accepting the visiting appointment at Queen's, New York

³¹¹ *SL*, p. 307

own particular kind of America.”³¹² It is the “own particular kind of America” here that is validated against (self-)deprecating clichés: “I suppose everyone has his own dream of America.”³¹³ Unlikely as it seems, Larkin’s engagement with America is profound.³¹⁴ America for Larkin is as much intimate dream as personal nightmare. It is no coincidence that in Larkin’s plan for his unfinished novel *No for an Answer*, the protagonist – tellingly called Sam – was ultimately to go to the USA as his relationship in Britain failed.

Larkin’s personal idea of the USA, his very own dream of America, had been manifest since his early boyhood, fostered by his youthful passion for jazz. His first record (“Tiger Rag” by Ray Noble) might have been by a British artist, but his next musical acquisitions were rooted firmly in the American jazz culture: The Washboard Rhythm Kings and Louis Armstrong. It is thus that Larkin engages intimately with an American Otherness long before it might be seen as an artistic influence. In his youth Larkin was impressed with the dance bands that would occasionally play a “hot number” with solos in it. He improvised on a drumkit his parents had given him and listened to jazz records with his friends. At university in Oxford where listening to jazz “was his most enjoyable way of feeling part of a community”³¹⁵ he hunted for American recordings. From the 1960s onwards he wrote columns and reviews on jazz. Even his thoroughly English female *alter ego* Brunette Coleman has a name derived from the jazz group “Blanche Coleman And Her All Girls’ Band”.³¹⁶

Larkin’s preoccupation with jazz opens up a larger American context in which multiple points of contact with the American Other – especially in literature – are

³¹² *SL*, p. 307

³¹³ *RW*, p. 70

³¹⁴ *SL*, 362: Discussing Amis’s novel “One Fat Englishman”, Larkin is scathing in his evaluation: the novel “takes its place among all the other books that don’t make me want to visit America.”

³¹⁵ Motion 1993, p. 86

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 86

explored. In his engagement with this quintessentially American music Larkin straddles the lines between the European modernism exemplified by Eliot and the post-Pound American modernism of jazz poetry and the Beats. To use a Larkinesque oxymoron one might say that Larkin's contact with America is one of temperate or old-fashioned modernism. Against the common prejudice, Larkin openly engages with modernism – particularly in the field of jazz – but it is the poet himself who defines the lines he will not cross.

Jazz as one of the chief elements in Larkin's dream of America only surfaces in two of the poems published in his lifetime: "For Sidney Bechet" from 1954 and "Reference Back" written in 1955. "For Sidney Bechet" with its titular debt to one of jazz's greatest solo musicians and its evocation of the New Orleans of the jazz heyday seems to be the most obvious choice to elucidate the importance of jazz and America for Larkin. The poem transposes a familiar Larkinesque trope – blissful non-place without an attached social community, unfenced existence, the padlocked cube of light – via jazz into the territory of Larkin's dream of America.

Larkin's ambiguous attitude towards America centres around the positive jazz dream of America and the often negative literary-academic dream. Jazz comes to represent Larkin's most positive American elsewhere; a personal utopia of abroad glimpsed from the safety of his living room. When he was in Oxford jazz meant being part of a community, jazz in Larkin's adult years "stands for a simple idea: that everything *real* is happening elsewhere"³¹⁷ – jazz's live audience was in America. B.J. Leggett sketches how in 1935 a ban by the British Ministry of Trade "effectively denied the entry of American jazz musicians until 1954" leaving the British jazz aficionado like Philip Larkin no other option but "to *overhear* jazz (on the gramophone or the radio), in effect,

³¹⁷ B.J. Leggett, *Larkin's Blues: Jazz Popular Music and Poetry*, Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, 1999, p. 185

to appropriate something essentially alien to his culture that, at the same time, appeared to speak directly to him.”³¹⁸ The connection to an “alien culture” far removed from actual, physical contact and enjoyed in perfect solitude, appears not only very familiar in the Larkinesque context but seems to be one of the jazz fan’s typical poses. The jazz audience “consists of individuals who, consciously or unconsciously, regard themselves as outside the accepted cultural framework and as unbound by many of its conventions”.³¹⁹ When jazz emerged as a movement at the end of the nineteenth century, it differed from the newly instigated highbrow culture exactly because it

was openly an *interactive*, participatory music in which the audience played an important role, to the extent that the line between audience and performers was often obscured. Culture built those lines painstakingly, establishing boundaries that relegated the audience to a primarily passive role. [...] [J]azz narrowed that gap.³²⁰

The solitary jazz fan in front of the wireless recreates an atmosphere where audience and performer are virtually indistinguishable.

Indeed, “For Sidney Bechet” captures exactly this dichotomy uniting the solitary jazz fan with the idea of a perceived “elsewhere”, a remote community that is at once intimately familiar and culturally alien. It is this sentiment that lies at the bottom of Larkin’s appraisal of jazz itself:

What was so exciting about jazz was the way its unique, simple gaiety instantly communicated itself to such widely differing kinds of human being – Negro porters, Japanese doctors, King George VI. As a private language of musicians it will not be nearly so important.³²¹

In his “Jazz Band in a Parisian Cabaret”, Langston Hughes sketches the jazz audience along similar lines:

Play it for the lords and ladies,

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 184

³¹⁹ Aaron Esman quoted in: Leggett 1999, p. 65

³²⁰ Lawrence W. Levine, “Jazz and American Culture” in *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 102, No. 403 (Jan.-Mar., 1989), p. 7

³²¹ Philip Larkin, *Larkin's Jazz Essays and Reviews 1940-1984*, Richard Palmer and John White (eds.), Continuum, London, 2001, p. 55/6

For the dukes and counts,
For the whores and gigolos,
For the American millionaires
And the school teachers
Out for a spree.³²²

Frank Marshall Davis in his “Jazz Band” enumerates “king and truck driver, queen and laundress, lord and labourer, banker and bum” everywhere between “London, Moscow, Paris, Hongkong, Cairo, Buenos Aires, Chicago, Sydney” as jazz’s eager recipients.³²³ Larkin may be too all-encompassing in sketching the universal appeal of jazz, but it is important to note, that to him, jazz is universal. It is not reserved for scholars or musicians. It conveys an emotional pleasure that is available to anyone who listens. This goes hand in hand with Larkin’s memories of his Oxford days. Among Oxford students “jazz became part of the private joke of existence, rather than a public expertise.”³²⁴

Jazz is about the personal experience, not about the technicalities of a highly sophisticated musical genre. However, jazz cannot be abstracted from the country of its origin: “Although it is now an international language, jazz [...] remains strictly American. Fans elsewhere know that it is American musicians who matter.”³²⁵ “Jazz seemed uniquely American.”³²⁶ America has thus found access to “the private joke of existence” through jazz. It is taken, casually, as a given imaginary world.

“For Sidney Bechet”, then, directly addresses the jazz musician with the second person singular pronoun emphasizing an intimacy that is rare in Larkin’s *oeuvre*: “That note you hold”. The word order “That note you hold” instead of “you hold that note” underlines the importance of the music itself by setting the note at the very beginning of

³²² Langston Hughes, *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes Vol. I The Poems 1921-1940*, Arnold Rampersad (ed.), University of Missouri Press, Columbia, 2001, p. 106

³²³ In: *The Second Set: The Jazz Poetry Anthology Vol. II*, Sascha Feinstein and Yusef Komunyakaa (eds.), Indiana University Press, 1996, p. 38

³²⁴ Philip Larkin, *All What Jazz A Record Diary*, Faber and Faber Limited, London, 1985, p. 17

³²⁵ *AWJ*, p. 38

³²⁶ Levine 1989, p. 8

the poem. The note itself is further characterized: “narrowing and rising”. The progressive form used here implies an immediacy and a process in the sketching of the development of the sound. Interestingly, a *YouTube* user comments under a video of Bechet’s “St. Louis Blues” “Man, I love the notes he hit”, like Larkin emphasizing the single notes.

The speaker in “For Sidney Bechet” constructs an image of New Orleans in order to describe the haunting quality of Bechet’s sound. The wording “shakes/Like New Orleans reflected on the water” firmly sets Bechet’s jazz in its Louisiana context. However, what needs to be noted here is the simile – the note shakes *like* New Orleans; we are not there. New Orleans appears as “appropriate falsehood” for “all ears”, as it is all too readily conjured up in its clichéd, jazz-infused glory: the “legendary Quarter” with its “balconies, flower-baskets and quadrilles” is evoked for some. Historically, Storyville, the area of New Orleans in which from 1897 to 1917 prostitution was legal under legislation drafted by Alderman Sidney Story, is considered the birthplace of jazz; most of the local brothels employed their own pianists or even bands. However, the New Orleans that is evoked here – Storyville, sporting houses and Bechet – is little more than a nostalgic memory at the time of the creation of Larkin’s poem.

The speaker remembers a time he has not witnessed and a place he has not been to. And yet the place with its long-gone characteristics is evoked by the power of the music that is perceived in the here and now.

Every age has its romantic city and ours is New Orleans. Canal Street, Basin Street, Rampart, Burgundy, Gravier, nearly every thoroughfare stays in our memory by reason of some unforgettable music: even its veterans, who must have known them for what they were, an appallingly vicious squalor corralled into a red light district by Alderman Sidney Story in 1897, can say nothing in its dispraise.³²⁷

Larkin writes this review under the title “Rose-Red-Light City” in 1962. In the

³²⁷ *AWJ*, p. 54

romantic/nostalgic context of “For Sidney Bechet” it is especially noteworthy that Larkin's idea of New Orleans is precisely mapped out in his mind not by reason of personal experience or geographical studies, but “by reason of some unforgettable music”. He is completely aware of the fact that this image of New Orleans is perceived through rose-tinted spectacles (as hinted at in the title of his review) but the nostalgia of (Bechet's) jazz conjures up a vivid and particular place of the mind.

The construction of the glorified image “Everyone making love and going shares” is strangely reminiscent of Larkin's “High Windows” written 13 years after “For Sidney Bechet” with its ironic “everyone young going down the long slide/To happiness”. Here, as in the earlier poem, the construction hints at something in which the speaker himself does not participate. The later poem is simultaneously loaded with envy, irony and a nostalgic bitterness. In “For Sidney Bechet”, however, “Everyone making love and going shares” is without envy. The music of New Orleans “has become synonymous with a particularly buoyant kind of jazz that seems to grow from a spontaneous enjoyment of living.”³²⁸ The “enjoyment of living” may be felt to correspond to T.S. Eliot's description in his *Notes Towards a Definition of Culture*: “Culture may even be described simply as that what makes life worth living”.³²⁹ In that respect the speaker in “For Sidney Bechet” finds his pleasure in an engagement with a culture that has left its specific American context behind. As Michael Longley notes in 1998: “Perhaps jazz is our century's most significant contribution to the culture of the world.”³³⁰ [emphasis mine] Larkin himself speaks of the “universality of jazz”³³¹ and underlines that “jazz is an international language, not a local dialect”.³³² Larkin's jazz

³²⁸ *AWJ*, p. 54

³²⁹ T.S. Eliot, *Notes Towards a Definition of Culture*, Faber and Faber Ltd., London, 1948, p. 27

³³⁰ Michael Longley, “A Perpetual One-Night Stand: Some Thoughts on Jazz and Poetry” in: *Writing Ulster*, No. 5, America and Ulster: A Cultural Correspondence (1998), p. 99

³³¹ *LJ*, p. 140

³³² *AWJ*, p. 275

displays a personal attachment to a world culture, and to Wordsworth's "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" usually reserved for poetry: "Oh, play that thing!"

In "For Sidney Bechet", this personal reaction suddenly interrupts the description of New Orleans in the previous lines. Strikingly, the characteristics of New Orleans are described without employing a single adjective. If New Orleans is the "romantic city" of the speaker's age, then the merest signifiers – "balconies, flower-baskets and quadrilles" – will suffice to conjure up the place with all its jazz attributes. Jürgen Hunkemöller identifies the popular French dance, the quadrille, as the source for the jazz piece "Tiger Rag", "das schließlich zum Repertoire eines jeden Ensembles in den USA gehören *musste* [emphasis mine]." ³³³ The vague "a legendary Quarter" is also enough to evoke the romantically idealized Storyville. It is thus that the speaker casually assumes a community, an "age" that will be transported to a certain place and time *of the mind* by being given the merest musical signifiers. This is why the spontaneous outburst "Oh, play that thing!" occurs almost in the middle of the poem; it is the music and the powerful personal reaction to it that matters. The speaker is swept away "to an entirely imaginary New Orleans." ³³⁴ The poem deliberately leaves unstated the source of the exclamation – is it the speaker who calls out or one of the musicians in imaginary New Orleans? It does not matter. The "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" marked by the exclamation is reminiscent of Larkin's reaction to the Bechet recording of "Nobody Knows The Way I Feel This Morning"; the sudden exclamation "Power and

³³³ "that simply had to be part of any American ensembles' repertoire" [translation mine] He quotes jazz trumpeter Bunk Johnson: "And quadrilles, I was crazy to play quadrilles. This quadrille, the first eight bars of what the bands are usin' today, *Tiger Rag*, that's King Bolden's first eight bars we would play to get your partner ready for quadrille. And, in later years, 'twas taken and turned into *Tiger Rag* by musicians that could read." Jürgen Hunkemöller, "Ragtime" in: Hans Heinrich Eggebrecht (ed.), *Terminologie der Musik im 20. Jahrhundert*, Franz Steiner Verlag, Stuttgart, 1995, p. 361.

³³⁴ John Lucas, "Appropriate Falsehoods: English Poets and American Jazz" in: *The Yearbook of English Studies*, Vol. 17, British Poetry since 1945 Special Number (1987), p. 58

glory!”³³⁵ in a letter to Jim Sutton in 1941 with its breathless, overwhelmed enthusiasm is perhaps directly mirrored by the exclamation in the poem written thirteen years later. When Larkin did go to see bands play at the local venue, he remembers being impressed by “the shouts of ‘Yeah, man’”.³³⁶

John Osborne attempts to locate the exact origins of the exclamation in “For Sidney Bechet”. He suggests several possible sources reaching from Langston Hughes’s poem “Jazz Band in a Parisian Cabaret” to Louis Armstrong himself³³⁷; John Lucas suggests as a source King Oliver’s “Sugar Foot Stomp”. Frank Marshall Davis’s poem “Jazz Band” from 1935 begins with the urging “Play that thing, you jazz mad fools!” which directly mirrors the beginning of Hughes’s poem. But the original source of the exclamation is perhaps irrelevant in the context of the poem. Significantly, the sudden outbreak “reminds us of the distance between the world of those ‘antique negroes’ (to quote from another Larkin poem that alludes to King Oliver)”³³⁸ and the speaker. The dream of America is not only spatially but also temporally distant. The music bridges the distance.

Since the speaker is not *in* New Orleans enjoying the live experience in one of the city’s jazz clubs, he adopts the only pose British jazz aficionados could take. Bechet’s jazz is perceived through the medium of the gramophone or radio. “For Sidney Bechet” “succeeds in finding a way of representing not so much the music itself but someone *listening* to the music at the very moment [...] the poem is articulated.”³³⁹ The poem is thus not about jazz itself but concerned with a certain *idea* of New Orleans, an *idea* of America: “we are discussing [...] the *image* [...] of New Orleans and not the place

³³⁵ Motion 1993, p. 47

³³⁶ *AWJ*, p. 16

³³⁷ Osborne 2008, p. 37/8

³³⁸ Lucas 1987, p. 58

³³⁹ Leggett 1999, p. 77

itself.”³⁴⁰

After exclaiming “Oh, play that thing!” the speaker returns to the description of New Orleans. Bechet’s music for some evokes “Mute glorious Storyvilles” with “sporting-house girls”. The plural “Storyvilles” hints at the different images in different listeners’ minds that are conjured up by Bechet’s music. This directly corresponds to Larkin’s idea of “particular *kind[s]* of America” [emphasis mine] elaborated in his letter to Conquest.

The speaker in “For Sidney Bechet” continues describing the mental images of others by detailing a Storyville scene. The use of the word “sporting-house”, a rare American euphemism for brothel, underlines the poem’s American context. Interestingly, Larkin himself states – when reviewing books on American jazz – that “to add to its [jazz’s] history or anecdote requires [...] an authoritative way with the American language”.³⁴¹ In order to remain credible within the jazz context, Larkin deliberately employs Americanisms.

Interestingly, the images of New Orleans become more vivid as the poem homes in on the Storyville scene. Undescribed “balconies” and “flower baskets” are set against the sporting house girls “priced far above rubies”. The vision of New Orleans becomes more and more animated and detailed the closer the poem moves to the home of the music: “the heart of jazz lies in the religious vitality of New Orleans music.”³⁴²

In the poem, the scene is described in some more detail: “Sporting-house girls” are getting busy while the band is playing and “scholars *manqués* nod around unnoticed/Wrapped up in personnels like old plaids.” The image works on more than one level. On the one hand “scholars *manqués*” might be a play on the “professors” –

³⁴⁰ Osborne 2008, p. 33

³⁴¹ *LJ*, p. 39

³⁴² Philip Larkin, “Mouldie figges”, *The Guardian*, Nov 7th, 1958, accessed online 06/01/2012
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/theguardian/2008/nov/07/3>

the house pianists employed in Storyville brothels while at the same time detailing the cliché of the typical jazz aficionado: not young, intellectual, on the fringes of society, sitting in front of his gramophone intent on identifying each player in the piece of music. The “scholars manqués” dream up Storyville and New Orleans in the same way as the speaker. The fundamental difference between those jazz fans and the speaker is detailed in the following stanzas.

The speaker has sketched the images jazz typically conjures up – New Orleans and scenes from Storyville at the beginning of the 20th century. The reference to “quadrilles” sets up a kind of ‘secret jazz community’. New Orleans as the romantic city of the speaker’s age and generation establishes a kind of mutual consent: yes, this is the New Orleans we nostalgically picture when we listen to the right music.

This impression of a frail community is shattered as the speaker sets himself apart: “On me your voice falls as they say love should”. While “others” may license “mute glorious Storyvilles” without music, he perceives the images through the music. While the kind of love the prostitutes can offer is dubious, Bechet’s jazz falls on the speaker like real love. The movement of Bechet’s note that runs through the poem likens Bechet’s sound to a benediction on the head of the speaker alone. First, the note is “narrowing and rising” only to “fall” on the speaker mirroring the movement and the expression of “falling in love”. It seems as if the speaker is the only correct aim of the music. The speaker thus strikes the pose of the typical jazz fan: while “old-style pop music [...] crystalized and preserved the relation of human beings in love (‘They’re playing our song’), jazz, more often than not, is itself the love object for its devotees.”³⁴³ Interestingly, in a letter to Monica, Larkin himself connects the “enormous yes” evoked by jazz with pop music. Criticized about the “enormous yes” he writes to

³⁴³ Eric Hobsbaum quoted in: Leggett 1999, p. 50

Monica: “I feel defensive about that Bechet line: have they never heard the Beatles singing ‘She loves you – yeah, yeah, yeah-?’”³⁴⁴ “For Sidney Bechet” is indeed not necessarily about jazz, it is about personal elation in the face of music – and the image of a place. The poem establishes common ground only to insist on the personal experience of the music. The place itself becomes irrelevant in the face of not only “the spontaneous enjoyment of living”, but also of love – love for music. This is why Leggett can answer the question: “Is it of any real importance to know which Bechet recording is playing in ‘For Sidney Bechet?’” with “Perhaps not.”³⁴⁵ It is important that Bechet plays.

Music in the poem becomes the ultimate realisation of love without its social attachments – a version of the affection granted by the sporting-house girls. This is the solitary love music brings: “Like an enormous yes”; a “yes” that does not require another person to reciprocate; it merely requires open ears. The combination “love” and “enormous yes” is one of the most positive expressions in Larkin’s *oeuvre*. In the same way that the speaker burst out “Oh, play that thing!” in the third stanza, he cannot seem to contain himself. While the clichéd descriptions of New Orleans remain a kind of parametric code for the members of a certain generation in the previous stanzas, the speaker’s very own and apparently unique reaction is suddenly enthusiastic. While the previous stanzas mentioned “some”, “others”, “their chairs” and “their fads” in an almost blasé way, there is suddenly a culmination of singular pronouns: “on *me your* voice falls”, “*My* Crescent City”, “*your* speech” [emphasis mine] not only highlighting the very personal connection between music and listener but also underlining how the speaker’s perception of the music is absolutely singular. About the “jazz boom” of the Sixties Larkin writes in 1961 how a jazz concertgoer will “be infected by an enthusiasm

³⁴⁴ *LM*, p. 327

³⁴⁵ Leggett 1999, p. 59

as intense as it is innocent”.³⁴⁶ It is this singular enthusiasm and an almost religious innocence that permeates “For Sidney Bechet”.

While others are merely reminded of New Orleans clichés on perceiving Bechet’s music, the speaker conjures up a very special place “My Crescent City/Is where your speech alone is understood” – no one else understands and fully takes to heart the music as the speaker does. The place itself thus becomes abstract: “my Crescent City” ceases to be a precise geographical location. Julie Raimondi in her dissertation *Space, Place, and Music in New Orleans* notes how “music enables people to socially construct space because it accesses the nexus of memory and emotion.”³⁴⁷ Bechet’s music accesses memory and emotion and thus constructs the idea of a social place in the speaker’s fundamentally a-social environment. Despite all this, this place of the mind, the ideal place, has its roots in American jazz lore. The New Orleans of “For Sidney Bechet” underlines Larkin’s personal, idealized dream of America, but historical knowledge of the city is in no way essential for the comprehension of the poem.

The final two lines “And greeted as the natural noise of good,/Scattering long-haired grief and scored pity” make allusions which need explication for many readers. John Lucas elaborates how in “the 1950s ‘long hair’ was a term of genial contempt directed by jazzmen at classical or ‘serious’ musicians.”³⁴⁸ In 1956 a reporter of the *New York Times* sketched the European approach to jazz: Europeans take to jazz with “what most Americans would call a ‘long-haired approach’. They [Europeans] like to contemplate it, dissect it, take it apart to see what makes it what it is.”³⁴⁹ Truly American jazz with its spontaneous improvisation – with its first two modern ambassadors Armstrong and Bechet – is the perfect antithesis to the “long-haired grief” and the “scored” (as in “set

³⁴⁶ *AWJ*, p.42

³⁴⁷ Julie Raimondi, *Space, Place, and Music in New Orleans*, dissertation, University of California, 2012, p. ii, accessed online 19/07/2012 <http://www.julieraimondi.com/Raimondi%20Manuscript%20Final.pdf>

³⁴⁸ Lucas 1987, p. 58/9

³⁴⁹ Quoted in: Levine 1989, p. 17

to a score”) stringency of classical music. When jazz emerged at the turn of the twentieth century it surfaced as “uniquely American” in opposition to the static nature of European “high Culture”.³⁵⁰ The speaker’s pure enthusiasm directed at and derived from Bechet’s music hints at a preference for the direct, unintellectualized American approach. He consciously rejects the overly intellectualized European approach to jazz that the scholars *manqués* in the poem might call their own.

“Jazz music was the music you could, if you were young, associate with a mild rebelliousness, [...] with an argot known only to the *cognoscenti*”³⁵¹, “the best antidote against authoritarian systems that would tell us what to think and how to feel.”³⁵² In the same way as Larkin notes how at a jazz concert “if you are over 30, you may be the oldest person in a crowd of, say, 2,000”³⁵³ Bechet’s music in the poem is no longer about rebellion. It is about nostalgia. The speaker’s dream of America “can last for only so long as the record itself. The poem [“For Sidney Bechet”] has about it the neat containment of the kind of jazz number that fits perfectly into the limitations of a 78rpm record.”³⁵⁴ The dream of America in which “music dispels [...] pity and suffering”³⁵⁵ will be over as soon as the record stops playing. The music is the “natural noise of good” that stands in a pronounced contrast with “the noise” of the “deafening band” playing “mock jazz” in Larkin’s “The Dance”. It is the “good noise” that drowns out grief and pity.

“For Sidney Bechet” thus explores multiple polarities: between the ordinary jazz fan and the extraordinary experience of the speaker; between the mere image of New

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 8 – Levine quotes from Henry James’s famous biography of Nathaniel Hawthorne which comes to the conclusion that Americans have “the elements of modern man with *culture* quite left out.” hinting at the almost primordial nature of a new culture of jazz.

³⁵¹ Lucas 1987, p. 50/1

³⁵² Longley 1998, p. 97

³⁵³ *AWJ*, p. 42

³⁵⁴ Lucas 1987, p. 59

³⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 59

Orleans and the poet's private unique "Crescent City"; between love as prostitution and the "pure" love between music lover and music; between the intellectual and the emotional approach to jazz; and between place, imagined place and here.

Larkin's dream of America certainly revolves around his passion for jazz, but "For Sidney Bechet" is in effect neither a poem about Bechet and jazz nor about America. Interestingly, Larkin himself never refers to the "American Dream". Even in his jazz review about jazz musician Django Reinhardt's unshakable faith that he would be accepted in the USA Larkin still refers to "the dream of America".³⁵⁶ This is perhaps to underline a personal, intimate idea of America that has nothing of the 'dishwasher to millionaire'-cliché commonly associated with the term.³⁵⁷

Trevor Tolley observed: Larkin did not listen to jazz "because it was felt to be culturally important"; Larkin listened to jazz "because it spoke to him with immediacy."³⁵⁸ "It is the music *as music* that matters first and foremost."³⁵⁹ Or, as Larkin emphasizes the personal reaction to jazz; the privacy of the emotion: "jazz is to be appreciated not as a musical exercise in technique, but as an emotional experience, one that can exhilarate or sadden."³⁶⁰ Jazz in "For Sidney Bechet" certainly exhilarates. Langston Hughes in his "Jazz Band in a Parisian Cabaret" combines these two properties of jazz in "that tune/That laughs and cries at the same time."³⁶¹ Larkin's observation that modernism "helps us neither to enjoy nor endure"³⁶² rings particularly true in this context. In Larkin's view, true jazz thus accomplishes something of which modernism is not capable.

³⁵⁶ *LJ*, p. 51

³⁵⁷ Note: The term "American Dream" was coined by James Truslow Adams in his "Epic of America" in 1931; Larkin's review was written in 1961, so the concept must have been familiar to him. Nonetheless, Larkin seems to prefer his own terminology.

³⁵⁸ Quoted in: Leggett 1999, p. 28

³⁵⁹ *LJ*, p. 11

³⁶⁰ *LJ*, p. 21

³⁶¹ Hughes 2001, p. 106

³⁶² *AWJ*, p. 27

John Lucas suggests Bechet's "Blue Horizon" as the source for the speaker's elation in the poem. The title of the track uncannily prefigures the "bluish neutral distance" of a poem Larkin should write seven years later: in "Here" the speaker tries in vain to attain a blissful non-place.³⁶³

Jazz for Larkin, then, is not an expression of community; it remains "that unique private excitement."³⁶⁴ Jazz becomes yet another 'elsewhere' in Larkin's perception. As Leggett notes: "It is significant in regard to Larkin's concept of 'elsewhere' that all of his poems explicitly about jazz reenact in some form the listener's own exclusion."³⁶⁵ Especially in the context of "For Sidney Bechet", however, it is vital to define the quality of this apparent exclusion. "For Sidney Bechet" is neither the complete, deliberate exclusion of "Best Society" nor the bleak loneliness of "Friday Night in the Royal Station Hotel".

Jazz is not usually seen as a solitary activity. The particular appeal of jazz might lie in the performance of the improvising solo musician, but the solo performance makes little sense without an accompanying band. Despite the fascination of clandestine jam sessions it is the (paying) audience that makes a live session worthwhile. It is the same with recorded music: bands and labels would make significantly less money if they did not put their music out on records. Jazz cannot work without its aficionados. Larkin's passion for jazz permits him to engage with a largely imaginary community and find personal, intimate pleasure in it, a pleasure that, in its close proximity to love, differs profoundly from the viciously locked door in "Best Society". Jazz, as Janice Rossen notes, "is one of the few spheres in Larkin in which emotion is permitted without being

³⁶³ In his jazz column, Larkin praises Bechet's "Blue Horizon" in such detail as to make the conclusion – "For Sidney Bechet" is about this particular piece – very likely: "six choruses of slow blues in which Bechet climbs without interruption of hurry from lower to upper register, his clarinet tone at first thick and throbbing, then soaring like Melba in an extraordinary blend of lyricism and power that constituted the unique Bechet voice, commanding attention the instant it sounded.", *AWJ*, p. 41

³⁶⁴ *AWJ*, p. 15

³⁶⁵ Leggett 1999, p. 187/8

smothered by irony.”³⁶⁶

Jazz features explicitly in “For Sidney Bechet” but it is not *about* jazz in the way that Leggett identifies. Other poems may seem to have fewer central references to jazz. However, we must bear in mind that Larkin had an exclusive notion of what jazz was, or should be. The speaker in “Reasons for Attendance” might be lured to “the lighted” glass of a party by “The trumpet’s voice, loud and authoritative”, but the “beat of happiness” the dancers “maul to and fro” to is more likely to be the beat of an ordinary dance band. If the poem was really about the speaker’s “jazz as art” versus the dancer’s “jazz as dance music”³⁶⁷ then the celebration of art would surely not be realised as “that lifted, rough-tongued bell” but as something like “my art’s perfect cornet”. A band plays in the unfinished “The Dance”, but the speaker as connoisseur of the genre merely derides this as “mock jazz”. Besides, he has more immediate things to worry about.

“None of the books have time” from 1960 remained unpublished during Larkin’s lifetime but also exemplifies the solitary pleasure of jazz that is at the core of “For Sidney Bechet”. Here, jazz appears in a simile for happy self-contentment: “Selfishness is like listening to good jazz/With drinks for further orders and a huge fire.” “None of the books have time” thus repeatedly establishes jazz as one of the main ingredients of the blissful, secluded non-place. Interestingly in this context, the poem also reverts to yet another characteristic of the Larkinesque non-place. The “huge fire” in “None of the books have time” corresponds to the breathing “gas fire” in the poem that employs “uncontradicting solitude” as a metaphor for blissful non-place, “Best Society”.

Written roughly one and a half years after “For Sidney Bechet”, Larkin’s “Reference Back” sets the blissful non-place of the former poem against the “unsatisfactory room” of the shared jazz experience. Though set in his mother’s house the poem refuses to

³⁶⁶ Quoted in: Leggett 1999, p. 78

³⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 188

mention “mother” explicitly. The blissful non-place of “For Sidney Bechet” is replaced by the lack of satisfaction offered by what should by rights be legitimate anthropological place: “home” (“unsatisfactory” is repeated four times in the poem’s three stanzas).

Leggett groups “Reference Back” among those of Larkin’s poems that are “explicitly about jazz”, but even here matters are more ambiguous than this grouping implies. Much like “For Sidney Bechet”, “Reference Back” is not strictly about jazz; it rather uses jazz as a vehicle to underline a sense of exclusion. In contrast with the exhilarating experience of Bechet’s single jazz note in “For Sidney Bechet”, the speaker in “Reference Back” plays “record after record, idly” without much personal response. Larkin places “That note you hold” at the very beginning of “For Sidney Bechet”, thus emphasizing the significance of that single note for the speaker’s personal experience. “Reference Back” starts with a comment in italics, “*That was a pretty one*”. His mother’s reaction is simultaneously uncalled for and in an irritatingly inappropriate register. There is no room for the speaker to engage with the music as the mother’s exclamation directly at the beginning of the poem cuts off thoughts and the music’s personal meaning before they have a chance to emerge.

Playing records in this environment is a waste of time: “Wasting my time at home, that you/Looked so much forward to.” The use of the first and second person singular pronouns here serves to underline the emotional distance between the poem’s protagonists. This is further highlighted by the spatial distance: the mother calls from the “unsatisfactory hall”; the son puts on records in “the unsatisfactory room”. Jazz is thus not the focus of an imagined community of jazz lovers; here it serves merely as background music designed to kill time.

The mother’s comment “*That was a pretty one*” gains particular gravity in the second

stanza. The track played is King Oliver's "Riverside Blues" – "Oliver's *Riverside* Blues, it was." To the jazz aficionado this is the historical beginning of New Orleans jazz, an extremely significant piece of music which suffers somewhat from merely being called "pretty". The mother's comment is nonetheless true – the song *is* pretty – leading to an uncomfortable alliance between mother and son. The mother invades the speaker's idealized jazz place.

While in "For Sidney Bechet" a single note evokes a detailed image of a utopian jazz New Orleans, "Reference Back" offers no such respite. The speaker imagines "The flock of notes those antique negroes blew/Out of Chicago air into/A huge remembering pre-electric horn", but instead of conjuring up an imagined Chicago, the music merely builds a "sudden bridge/From you unsatisfactory age/To my unsatisfactory prime." Listening to the same piece of music reveals what mother and son have in common: their lives are unsatisfactory. Paradoxically, however, the bridge made by music also highlights the fundamental difference between mother and son: the son is in his "prime"; the mother battles "age". The markedly different perception of the music – compare the son's poetic "flock of notes" to the mother's ordinary "pretty" – serves to illustrate the unsatisfactory nature of both their lives. The potential enjoyment of the jazz piece like the paean for Sidney Bechet's music is eliminated by the forced familiar community: the son shares his music out of a sense of familiar duty.

In a typical Larkin stance the narrow everyday situation of the poem opens up to larger musings on life: "We are not suited to the long perspectives". Typically, Larkin's speakers dread the long perspective into the future. Between the son's "unsatisfactory prime" in "Reference Back" and the mother's "unsatisfactory age" lies a long perspective. At the end of this perspective, hazy but unmistakable, lies the final landmark: death. However, the long perspective into the past does not seem to be

equally oppressive. The speaker in "Reference Back" evokes jazz musicians of the distant past: "The flock of notes those antique negroes blew/Out of Chicago air [...] /The year after I was born". It is this perspective into the past that emphasizes the age gap between mother and son, but the look into the past with its spatial and temporal distance – back into 1923, back to Chicago – in itself holds no menace. There is still a certain solace in meaningful music. The title of the poem, then, is a reflection of these long perspectives: the shortest spatial distance lies between mother and son ("room" – "hall"). The longest perspective is between speaker and "antique negroes", closely followed by the temporal distance between the speaker's "prime" and the mother's "age". Furthermore, there is a distance between the speaker and the situation he sketches underlined by the use of the past tense ("I heard you call", "I played record after record" etc.).

The poem observes that long perspectives "link us to our losses: worse,/They show us what we have as it once was,/Blindly undiminished, just as though/By acting differently we could have kept it so." The speaker gives in to a resigned nostalgia. This is not the passionate nostalgia for the present the speaker in "Annus Mirabilis" experiences. It is a hollow nostalgia for past, present and future. The speaker longingly turns to a past he could never possibly be part of: "those antique negroes", "a year after I was born", *in Chicago*. He laments the idleness of the present: "my unsatisfactory prime". And he is not suited to the long perspectives. Strikingly, Larkin picks up the expression "undiminished" again in "Sad Steps", written three years later. Here, the resigned nostalgia for "being young" is expressed much less ambiguously: "it can't come again,/But is for others undiminished somewhere."

The solitary blissful non-place of an imaginary jazz community in "For Sidney Bechet" is shattered in "Reference Back". The imaginary jazz community is replaced by

a forced and inescapable family community of mother and son. The comfortable alien and comfortably removed culture is replaced by a close anthropological familiarity. If Bechet's note conjures up a blissful non-place this turns into "unsatisfactory" anthropological place in "Reference Back". The hastily evoked Chicago – there are no flower baskets or balconies, merely "Chicago air" (the speaker literally cannot get a hold of the place) – pales in comparison to the jazz dream of America in "For Sidney Bechet". Larkin's yearned after non-place is imaged either as a private room with a locked door as in "Best Society" or the edge of the open sea as in "Here". The "unsatisfactory room" in "Reference Back" is not this kind of place.

The speaker's nostalgia in "Reference Back" thus differs markedly from the direct jazz nostalgia of Kingley Amis's "Farewell Blues" or the historical jazz recollections of John Wain's "Music On The Water". In Larkin's poem there is a remote longing that has a vague connection to jazz, but is not dependent on the existence of a musical genre or its history.

Amis's "Farewell Blues" underlines a specific version of nostalgia. His poem has nothing of the exuberant enthusiasm of "For Sidney Bechet" or the slow, vague longing of "Reference Back". Amis's "pastiche of Hardy's great poem 'Friends Beyond'"³⁶⁸ deliberately remains low-brow. It adopts the vernacular diction from the college days, "bloody row" and "f**k-all" to hark back to those carefree days in which jazz was "part of the private joke of existence" while lashing out against the "improvising of f**k-all" of modern jazz. Amis's poem is blatantly nostalgic in such an exaggerated way as to taste of sarcasm. While Larkin's speaker in "For Sidney Bechet" can still enthusiastically celebrate "That note you hold", Amis's speaker can only state with almost wry resignation: "Dead's the note we loved that swelled within us, made us gasp

³⁶⁸ Lucas 1987, p. 55

and stare,/Simple joy and simple sadness thrashing the astounded air.”³⁶⁹ Amis’s poem substitutes jazz’s blissful non-place with the anthropological place of the graveyard mourning the loss of jazz’s great trailblazers. While the speaker’s nostalgia for jazz times gone is almost defiant, the nostalgia in Larkin’s “Reference Back” is of an altogether different quality.

“Reference Back” is thus neither about jazz nor a “jazz poem” as Leggett calls it. Jazz, or much more precisely, the “flock of notes” of Oliver’s “Riverside Blues” merely serves as an objective correlative for a diffuse nostalgia. With the rise of modern jazz, Larkin feels that “[s]omething [...] had snapped, and I was drifting deeper into the shadowland of middle age. Cold death had taken its first citadel.”³⁷⁰ As we have seen, “Reference Back” takes this jazz-related sentiment as a starting point but negotiates much more than just jazz.

The absence of escape into an imagined jazz world in “Reference Back” paradoxically confirms the significance of the imaginary American elsewhere in the poem. Chicago and the American elsewhere – much like New Orleans in “For Sidney Bechet” – still serve as the jazz-infused antidote to the “unsatisfactory room”. Larkin’s engagement with the American Other in “Reference Back” is thus almost offhand. Nonetheless, Larkin’s dream of America remains an idealised one even in this poem. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why Larkin never actually went to the US.

Larkin's jazz poems serve to underline a deep-set characteristic of his sensibility. “Larkin never reviewed a jazz gig and for that matter hardly ever attended one. Now to a certain kind of jazz enthusiast, ‘being there’ is almost everything.”³⁷¹ It is no surprise that the introduction to *Larkin's Jazz* should pick up this important point. Larkin never

³⁶⁹ Quoted in: Lucas 1987, p. 55

³⁷⁰ *AWJ*, p. 22

³⁷¹ *LJ*, p. 12

strives to “be there”; his personae strive to “be here”. For Larkin, in poetry as in jazz, “being here” is the crucial sentiment. This is also mirrored in “Broadcast”, another one of Larkin’s poems in which music – although here it is Elgar instead of Bechet – features prominently. Significantly, the speaker is again not *there*, but witnessing the concert in front of the wireless listening with rapture to “Cascades of monumental slithering.” While the “rabid storms of chording” rage *there*, “*Here* it goes quickly dark.” [emphasis mine]

Only in the early “Two Guitar Pieces” from 1946 is the speaker actually and literally present at the place of the music’s creation. The blues scenario with the “shack by the railroad”, the “wheatstraws”, “dungarees” and “Dark hands and heads shaded from sun and working” is the epitome of the American blues cliché whose “Contentedly discontent” nature strangely agrees with Larkin’s typical posture. Although the speaker remains invisible in the first part of the poem, we are very much here – “Not even the wagon aims to go anywhere”. In the second of the “Two Guitar Pieces” the speaker assumes an easy community of “I”, “you” and “our friend” who “strikes this note, that note” on his guitar to an overwhelmed and immediate reaction: “I am trembling:/I am suddenly charged with their language, these six strings.”

One of the few instances when Larkin writes about encountering live jazz almost breathless with enthusiasm is on his trip to Paris with Bruce Montgomery in May 1952. That this feverishly positive encounter should happen on one of the few occasions when Larkin actually went abroad is significant in this context. An imagined cultural community is more likely to be maintained in a cultural environment that differs from one’s own.

The historical fact that Bechet hardly performed in his native New Orleans after his career had taken off is not accounted for in “For Sidney Bechet”. Bechet first went to

New York, then to the UK, France, Belgium and Moscow before finally settling in Paris (where Larkin and Montgomery hoped to encounter “Le Dieu”). In the speaker’s imagination, however, the home of jazz remains in New Orleans. “Reference Back” takes Chicago as the imaginary jazz place. For Larkin, New Orleans and Chicago represent “the difference between white&negro” in the jazz context. While New Orleans comes to stand for the authentic “whole body” black jazz, the white “nerve” jazz of Chicago is “cynical and sardonic” but nonetheless “more intelligent.”³⁷² By virtue of musical emotion, Larkin constructs two American places of the mind.

It is thus that the poet engages paradoxically with a foreign community through music that is decontextualised from its original community. “The middle-class English audience attributed authenticity to an American jazz from which they were effectively excluded – truly authentic jazz was played by black musicians for black audiences [...]”³⁷³ – “by Negroes for Negroes.”³⁷⁴ Jazz, New Orleans and Chicago serve as *partes pro toto* for a dreamed up America and thus become another “padlocked cube of light”, the possibility of “unfenced existence” and ideal non-place in Larkin’s mind, enjoyed alone in his room. Alan Plater in his introduction to *Larkin's Jazz* sketches exactly this scenario: Larkin “is the ultimate jazz freak, alone in his room, tapping his foot and snapping his fingers to the music he loves. We all have such a room.”³⁷⁵ It is from the safety of this room that Larkin contemplates jazz and America.

Robert Conquest remembers:

I once offered to meet his [Larkin’s] plane in that city [New Orleans], see him to a hotel and so on, so that he could make a local pilgrimage to the blues’ historical milieu. This probably shaky enough project failed when he heard that Congo Square had been subsumed into a *Cultural Center*.³⁷⁶

³⁷² *SL*, p. 20/1

³⁷³ Leggett 1999, p. 19

³⁷⁴ *AWJ*, p. 36

³⁷⁵ *LJ*, p. xi

³⁷⁶ Robert Conquest, “New Lines, Movements, and Modernisms” in: *The Movement Reconsidered*, Zachary Leader (ed.), Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 310

In Larkin's imagination, Congo Square had always been firmly linked with his fascination for jazz: "That simple trick of the suspended beat, that had made the slaves shuffle in Congo Square on Saturday nights, was something that never palled."³⁷⁷ Blake Morrison shares Conquest's impression: "Perhaps the vastness of America frightened him [Larkin]. [...] It seems he felt more comfortable on narrow ground – or within an island fastness."³⁷⁸ The idea of the imaginary, as opposed to the actual musical refuge is already in place in "Two Guitar Pieces". The harmony of a strummed guitar "builds within this room a second room". However, in "Two Guitar Pieces" from 1946, the promise of the musical version of the "padlocked cube of light" cannot be reached:

We cannot trace that room; and then again
Because it is not a room, nor a world but only
A figure spun on stirring of the air,
And so, untrue.

Tellingly, the first part of "Two Guitar Pieces" evades the idea of a room altogether: the poem is set "stretched into the sun". In the first 'Guitar Piece' the scenario of the blues is typically American; the lack of rhyme atypical for the meticulous craftsman Larkin.

The sentiment expressed, however, is typically Larkinesque. The trope of the individual room is connected to jazz in Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man*. The black protagonist

goes underground because he feels invisible [...] caught in a subterranean room, he listens to Louis Armstrong's 'Black and Blue'. [...] Ellison's protagonist has found a safe haven in one of the gaps in the social fabric, in a hole in which he can feed off society while being unseen from it.³⁷⁹

Although there is much more to Ellison's novel, the protagonist's posture strikingly

³⁷⁷ AWJ, p. 16

³⁷⁸ Blake Morrison, "'Still Going On, All Of It': The Movement in the 1950s and the Movement Today", in: Leader 2009, p. 24

It is interesting in the context to witness Larkin describe the island Sark in a letter to Monica Jones: "It is my ideal place. I wish we could go there again, just once again – these lanes! that sea! *The Mermaid!* The flowers" The cows! LM, p. 371; the excitement of Congo Square is clearly not part of the pastoralism of Larkin's "ideal place" with Monica. Jazz is Larkin's private place.

³⁷⁹ Peter Townsend, *Jazz in American Culture*, Edinburgh University Press Ltd., 2000, p. 113

resembles that of Larkin's jazz speakers.

America – realized through and connected with jazz – remains for Larkin a theoretical refuge, an idealized utopia, the blissful non-place. America is unfenced existence, the “widest prairies” from “Wires” (in the jazz context, “Wires” is the delectable direct counterpart to the music emanating from the “wireless”), but it is only unfenced existence in the solitary confines of the private room, connected with the aural pleasure of jazz.

“For Sidney Bechet” and “Reference Back” negotiate the personal jazz place; Larkin's engagement with jazz, however, is the ground for further imaginative connections with the literary America of the time. While Larkin's reference points in jazz are still the trad jazz heroes Bechet, Armstrong and Russell when he writes the poems in the mid-1950s, jazz history in the 1940s and 1950 was taken over by the emergence of a new form of jazz: bop as played by Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk or Dizzy Gillespie that had started the “modernist-revivalist war”.³⁸⁰ Larkin misses most of these developments - “I certainly think I suffered from not hearing jazz from about 1942 until 1956”³⁸¹- and notes in 1961 how the “young negro musicians produced a music [...] that was technically, melodically and rhythmically beyond their elders”; bop or modern jazz had “split the world of this music into two camps”.³⁸² With the emergence of bop comes a new literary school that takes to the new music as fish to water: the Beat Generation.

In the 1950s, bop was the emergent jazz form, and jazz talk was a potent force, a magical language for the new poets. Those poets who were stylistically opposed to the allusive and intellectualized work of the Pound-Eliot School seemed to gravitate towards jazz rhythms and the poetic language of jazz.³⁸³

In terms of jazz history, Larkin is clearly on the side of the old school not warming to

³⁸⁰ Bernard Gendron, “‘Moldy Figs’ and Modernists: Jazz at War (1942-1946)” in: Krin Gabbard (ed.) *Jazz among the Discourses*, Duke University Press, 1995, p. 31

³⁸¹ *LJ*, p. 7

³⁸² *AWJ*, p. 41

³⁸³ Barry Wallenstein, “The Jazz-Poetry Connection” in: *Performing Arts Journal*, Vol. 4, no. 3 (1980), p. 122

the jagged new rhythms that “nobody can understand”³⁸⁴: “I never liked bop. It seemed to me a nervous and hostile [...] music, at odds with the generous spirit of its predecessors.”³⁸⁵ On the other hand Larkin seems to be in tune with the new school of American poets in terms of literary history when he criticizes Pound's modernist experiments as “irresponsible exploitations of technique in contradiction of human life as we know it.”³⁸⁶ Larkin is caught between two stools. He agrees with the Beats in fundamental literary matters, but is not exactly in tune with their music despite his passion for jazz. Larkin's American contemporaries Kenneth Patchen or Kenneth Rexroth set poetry to the rhythms of bop; Jack Kerouac experiments in this direction, too, and Allen Ginsberg's imaginative world returns to jazz time and time again: the Beat Generation creates jazz poetry. It would not be entirely unthinkable for Larkin to follow their example.

Barry Wallenstein defines jazz poetry: “a poem that alludes to jazz is not the real thing unless it also demonstrates jazz-like rhythm or the feel of improvisation”³⁸⁷: “When a poem is merely about John Coltrane [...] and is too tied to its elegiac, adulatory tribute, often turning wistful and romantic, it stops short of being layered and ambiguous. It hasn't the depth jazz suggests.”³⁸⁸ Larkin's “For Sidney Bechet” and “Reference Back” thus fall short of the mark.

B.J. Leggett detects a trace of musical syncopation in the last line of “For Sidney Bechet”³⁸⁹, but – despite being layered *and* ambiguous as we have seen in my reading of the poem – the poem can hardly be read as rhythmic experiment in jazz-become-word. Michael Longley with his “Elegy for Fats Waller” and the rhythmic tune “THE

³⁸⁴ AWJ, p. 155

³⁸⁵ AWJ, p. 173

³⁸⁶ AWJ, p. 27

³⁸⁷ Barry Wallenstein, “JazzPoetry/jazz-poetry/‘jazz poetry’???” in: *African American Review*, Vol. 27, No. 4, Winter, 1993, p.665

³⁸⁸ Wallenstein 1993, p. 666

³⁸⁹ Leggett 1999, p. 96

SHOOK, THE SHAKE, THE SHEIKH OF ARABY” proves closer to the mark here, but is also far removed from the jazz poetry of, say, Langston Hughes’s “The Weary Blues” which – with its lack of enjambement³⁹⁰, its repetition and the actual blues sung – is fully in tune with Wallenstein’s requirements of the jazz poem. The same can be said for Carl Sandburg’s “Jazz Fantasia” with its onomatopoeic “husha-husha-hush” and the repeated exclamation of “o jazzmen” and “you jazzmen”. However, as Peter Townsend points out: “Jazz as the subject in these writers [...] rarely occupies the centre of their intentions.”³⁹¹ – the same is true for Larkin. Jazz in these poems, as proclaimed by Hugh L. Smith in 1958, is little more than “a set of romantic symbols.”³⁹² Wallenstein’s assertions are perhaps extreme, but the notion of “jazz poetry” is not as easy to pin down in terms of poetic techniques, as he alleges:

Some writers feel passionately that a jazz poem must in some way emulate the rhythmic quality of the music; others claim that ‘jazziness’ is an arbitrary term at best and that allusions to jazz musicians might be the only sure way to know whether the poem has been influenced by jazz.³⁹³

Larkin clearly and explicitly alludes to jazz musicians in “For Sidney Bechet” and “Reference Back”, but we have seen that the poems are not so much about jazz as using jazz as a vehicle to say something else. If jazz poetry is defined as “poetry set to jazz” in the style of Patchen, Rexroth, and to some extent Kerouac, then Larkin is far removed from this technique. Larkin does not perform his poetry, nor is he overly concerned with this version of jazz poetry. As he commented: “the only poetry-and-jazz track I have ever enjoyed [is] Christina Rossetti’s ‘When I am Dead, My Dearest’, sung by Belle Gonzalez on ‘Poets Set In Jazz’.”³⁹⁴ It is worth noting that the poem in question is from a collection that was published in 1862 while the Beat poets operate a hundred years

³⁹⁰ Compare: Leggett 1999 quotes David Evans: “Enjambement is unknown in the blues.”, p. 98

³⁹¹ Townsend 2000, p. 132

³⁹² Quoted in: Townsend 2000, p. 132

³⁹³ Sasha Feinstein quoted in: T.J. Anderson III, *Notes to Make the Sound Come Right: Four Innovators of Jazz Poetry*, The University of Arkansas Press, 2004, p. 4

³⁹⁴ *AWJ*, p. 139

later.

“For Sidney Bechet” and “Reference Back”, together with the unpublished “None of the books have time” and the early “Two Guitar Pieces” exhaust the jazz vein in Larkin's poetry, allowing for the conclusion that, yes, Larkin's poetry engages with an idea of America via jazz, but jazz does not run deeper than this. Despite a similar attitude towards the poetry of Pound, Larkin does not adopt the jazz techniques of the new poets. However, there is one poem in Larkin's *oeuvre* that perhaps can be said to qualify as jazz poetry. “Aubade” is not an obvious contender in this context, but though the poem lacks “allusions to jazz musicians” it shows a deep affinity with some jazz techniques.

B.J. Leggett convincingly argues that the first line of “Aubade” – “I work all day, and get half-drunk at night” is the classical entry of the blues – the forefather of jazz.³⁹⁵ “Aubade” is thus “not a blues, but a poem that has thoroughly absorbed the blues, something new made out of the blues”³⁹⁶ – much like Larkin's “Englishing” of French poems discussed in the last chapter. Leggett sketches how the first line of the poem seems slightly out of place before the literary diction of the second line – “Waking at four to soundless dark, I stare.” The reason for the slight irregularity is “the poetic equivalent of syncopation.”³⁹⁷

This alone would – along with Wallenstein's somewhat harsh classification – make “Aubade” a jazz poem. Leggett, however, detects further similarities with the blues: “working and drinking are the common properties of the blues”³⁹⁸ and are drawn together in the first line. When Wallenstein characterizes the “hip lingo” of the black

³⁹⁵ It would certainly go too far to relate the musical history from blues to jazz in the context of this thesis. For the sake of the argument I will use “blues” as synonymous with “jazz” in the discussion of “Aubade”. In 1961, Larkin wrote: “No one would contest that the blues are fundamental to jazz.”, *AWJ*, p. 36

³⁹⁶ Leggett 1999, p. 95

³⁹⁷ Leggett 1999, p.96

³⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 97

jazzman, he suggests that the colloquialism of the jazz language may well be an interpretation of “Whitman’s maxim that American poetry be the language of the ordinary man.”³⁹⁹ Larkin’s colloquial “half-drunk” points in the same direction. However, it is debatable whether Whitman’s maxim applies here; Larkin himself champions literature that uses “language in the way we all use it.”⁴⁰⁰ Perhaps this is one of the points that attract Larkin to the blues.

Leggett mentions that four o’ clock in the morning “turns out to be the most popular blues time for waking.”⁴⁰¹ Perhaps it is no coincidence that the speaker in Larkin’s “Sad Steps” also wakes at “four o’ clock” to stare at “the moon’s cleanliness.” The lack of enjambement in the first three lines of “Aubade” – while the rest of the poem runs on across lines – is furthermore an indicator of “the classic blues form, the twelve-bar three-line stanza”.⁴⁰² Larkin’s “Fuel Form Blues”⁴⁰³, composed in a letter to Kingsley Amis in 1942, and the “Blues”⁴⁰⁴ in a letter to James Sutton in 1943 indicate Larkin’s full awareness of the repeated three-line form of the classical blues.⁴⁰⁵ In the very first lines of “Aubade” Larkin only drops the merest hint of this blues form. His “jazz poetry” is more subtle, not the “talk of literary understrappers”.⁴⁰⁶

For Leggett, “Aubade” enacts the binary opposition of the blues “in which neither pole is acceptable, the despair that arises from a situation for which there is no

³⁹⁹ Barry Wallenstein, “Poetry and Jazz: A Twentieth Century Wedding”, in: *Black American Literature Forum*, Vol. 25, No. 3, Literature of Jazz Issue (Autumn, 1991), p. 599

⁴⁰⁰ *RW*, p. 72

⁴⁰¹ Leggett 1999, p. 98 – Leggett enumerates examples of the typical blues hour, e.g. Sunnyland Slim’s “Train Time” with “It was early morning, just about four o’ clock” or “Kassie Jones” by Furry Lewis with “I woke up this morning, four o’ clock”; on losing the gift of poetry, Larkin writes: “Poetry, that rare bird, has flown out of the window and now sings on some alien shore. In other words I just drink these days...I wake at four and lie worrying till seven.”, *SL*, p. 574

⁴⁰² Leggett 1999, p. 99

⁴⁰³ Philip Larkin, *The Complete Poems*, Archie Burnett (ed.), Faber and Faber Ltd., London, 2012, p. 216

⁴⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 225

⁴⁰⁵ In a review Larkin writes in 1960: “When you sing the blues, you sing a rhymed couplet (with the first line repeated) against a twelve-bar progression of the common chord on the keynote, the chord of the sub-dominant, the chord of the dominant, and the chord of the dominant seventh. It is a loose, monotonous form, easily fitted to physical movement like lifting or scrubbing, and it is the American Negro’s most characteristic expression.” Quoted in: Archie Burnett 2012, p. 560

⁴⁰⁶ *RW*, p. 79

resolution.”⁴⁰⁷ It is the beginning of “Aubade” which opens up the blues subtext; if Leggett’s argument was not convincing in that respect, the “binary opposition” would just as well suit any of Larkin’s poems. Leggett quotes from David Evans’s *Big Road Blues*: “The blues feeling, then, is caused by a struggle to succeed combined with an awareness of overwhelming difficulties. The consequence is that in the long run ‘there is no change’, so that ‘there’s nothin’ else to but what you’re doin’...and sing the blues.”⁴⁰⁸ It is perhaps this blues subtext that makes “Aubade”, one of Larkin’s “late grand poems”⁴⁰⁹, stand out from a host of Larkin’s poems that deal with the same subject matter: our inability to act in the face of death. It is thus “that ‘Aubade’ is much closer to a blues tradition than to the long English tradition that preceded it.”⁴¹⁰ Larkin’s maxim “At any level that matters, form and content are indivisible”⁴¹¹ comes to full fruition in “Aubade”. The blues subtext is not quintessential for the poem, but it adds a considerable level of credibility. At any level that matters, Larkin writes jazz poetry.

It remains curious that Larkin should take to jazz poetry in 1977 when the American bop fever has abated having made way for rock’n’roll⁴¹² and pop in Europe: “jazz as a model for literary composition is much used and debated during the 1950s and then virtually disappears from this role through the 1960 and 1970s.”⁴¹³ Charles Fair writes in the summer of 1977 that between the standardization of the experimental, between “poetry monotonously of the moment” and “New Wave Jazz [that] rattles on and on, like Muzak for the In-crowd” it is time for a change of the literary and musical climate:

⁴⁰⁷ Leggett 1999, p. 101

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 101

⁴⁰⁹ Osborne 2008, p. 247

⁴¹⁰ Leggett 1999, p. 102

⁴¹¹ *RW*, p. 69

⁴¹² Criticizing modern jazz, Larkin states: “this music, rock’n’roll, rhythm and blues, or just plain beat, is for all its tedious vulgarity nearer jazz than then rebarbative astringencies of Coleman, Coltrane und the late Eric Dolphy” somewhat defiantly setting mainstream “youth” music against modern jazz, *LJ*, p. 142

⁴¹³ Townsend 2000, p. 137

it is “time for something that we’ll all hate.”⁴¹⁴ *The Who* release “My Generation” with the lyrics “I hope I die before I get old” in 1965. In 1977 the *Sex Pistols* take over the Queen’s Silver Jubilee in Britain crowned by the number two chart position of their second single “God Save The Queen”. Perhaps it is no coincidence that Larkin returns to the blues – the music of his youth; the music of “mild rebellion” - in the year that punk rock breaks in Britain. The anarchy of the *Sex Pistols* came just too late for Larkin. However, it remains striking that “Aubade” should become so much denser, so much more haunting through the context of the blues. An essentially “English poem about death”⁴¹⁵ is enhanced through the context of an American musical genre.

It is thus that Larkin’s engagement with jazz in his poetry once more points to America and simultaneously underlines the idea of Larkin as temperate modernist. Larkin harshly criticizes the modernists’ foible for “allusions in poems to other poems or poets”⁴¹⁶ and according to Amis, The Movement was an expression of the general literary mood: “Nobody wants any more poems about philosophers or paintings or novelists or art galleries or mythology or foreign cities or other poems.”⁴¹⁷ As we have seen in the previous chapter, “The Card-Players” is closely connected to a painting Larkin saw in a book. In the American context, “For Sidney Bechet” and “Reference Back” include allusions not to poems and poets, but to musicians and pieces of music; “Aubade” even adopts jazz syncopation. The fundamental difference in the allusive character between Larkin’s and the modernists’ works lies in the fact that Larkin’s poems do not *rely* on these features. Larkin’s poetry offhandedly engages with (American) music or painting but not in the posture of the “literary understrappers

⁴¹⁴ Charles Fair, “Poetry and Jazz” in: *Chicago Review*, Vol. 29, No.1, Summer, 1977, p. 28 accessed online 15/07/2011 www.jstor.org/stable/25303651

⁴¹⁵ Leggett 1999, p. 102

⁴¹⁶ *RW*, p. 79

⁴¹⁷ Quoted in: Blake Morrison, *The Movement English Poetry and Fiction of the 1950s*, Oxford University Press, 1980, p. 61

letting you see they know the right people.”⁴¹⁸ He picks the subject matter as an intimate point of authentication. Larkin’s poems remain comprehensible and universally accessible.

Leggett notes the vernacular quality of “half-drunk” in the first three blues lines of “Aubade”. In *High Windows*, Larkin gravitates increasingly towards the vernacular: “They fuck you up” in “This Be The Verse” (1968), “the drivel of some bitch” in “Vers de Société”, “he’s fucking her” in “High Windows”, “Groping back to bed after a piss” in “Sad Steps”, Jan van Hogspeuw “pisses at the dark” in “The Card-Players” and there is “pissing yourself” in “The Old Fools”. “Love Again” from 1979, though unpublished during Larkin’s lifetime, adds “wanking” and “cunt” to this collection of the vernacular.⁴¹⁹

The sudden appearance of four-letter words in Larkin’s poetry is perhaps a reaction to his engagement with jazz. With the advent of modernism the fundamentals of the arts changed. In his introduction to *All What Jazz* Larkin famously castigates the three Ps – Parker, Pound, Picasso. The modern arts have been intellectualized to an extent in which academic poets create the “kind of poetry that needed elucidation”.⁴²⁰ Before the “mad lads” arrived “literature used language in the way we all use it, painting represented what anyone with normal vision sees, and music was an affair of nice noises rather than nasty ones.”⁴²¹

Simultaneously, however, Larkin fully acknowledges the importance of Armstrong for jazz in the modernist context: “Louis Armstrong was an enormously important cultural figure in our century, more important than Picasso in my opinion, but certainly

⁴¹⁸ *RW*, p. 79

⁴¹⁹ Larkin himself states somewhat contrarily: “these words are part of the palette. You use them when you want to shock. I don’t think I’ve ever shocked for the sake of shocking.” *FR*, p. 61 – in a letter to C.B. Cox in 1983 Larkin writes about “Love Again”: “it is intensely personal, with four-letter words for further orders” (*SL*, p. 705) underlining the personal, authenticating use of the vernacular

⁴²⁰ *Motion* 1993, p. 345

⁴²¹ *RW*, p. 72

quite comparable.”⁴²² In jazz, Larkin criticizes the modern ways of Parker, Coltrane or Gillespie favouring Louis Armstrong who is in fact “America’s foremost *modernist* without portfolio”.⁴²³ What appealed to Larkin in early modernist, pre-Parker jazz was perhaps the fact that “jazz musicians refused to limit themselves; they reached out to embrace the themes, the techniques, the idioms of any music they found appealing and *they did so with a minimum of fuss or comment* [emphasis mine].”⁴²⁴ The technique of “reaching out” to incorporate different musical styles or techniques in Armstrong’s early modernist jazz finds its equivalent in the pastiche, collage and idioms in early modernist literature. But while the likes of Eliot and Pound elaborately theorize about tradition and individual talents in poetry, Armstrong creates “a new artistic vocabulary to catch the temper of the times – and unlike many of the other modernists, he was doing it in the vernacular of the people.”⁴²⁵ It is perhaps this “vernacular of the people” – using music and “language in the way we all use it” - that makes the strongest impression on Larkin.

The jazz-inspired predilection for plain speech is mirrored in the poetry of Larkin’s contemporaries on the other side of the Atlantic. Few other literary groups have been linked to jazz as explicitly as the Beat Generation. Larkin was not unaware of the “beatniks who opt out of society in favour of the hypodermic and Zen idleness” and knew they had made Charlie Parker “their patron saint”.⁴²⁶ Larkin’s generation may have been a generation of “drinkers. Not druggers.”⁴²⁷ and Larkin may make the Beats’ patron saint responsible for the alienation of modernism in jazz, but if Larkin uses jazz

⁴²² *SL*, p. 443

⁴²³ Tad Richards in: *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of American Poets and Poetry*, accessed online 16/04/2012 <http://www.scribd.com/doc/73554021/Jazz-and-American-Poetry>

⁴²⁴ Levine 1989, p. 18

⁴²⁵ Tad Richards in: *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of American Poets and Poetry*, accessed online 09/12/11 www.opu40.org/tadrichards/JazzUsPoetry.html

⁴²⁶ *LJ*, p.139

⁴²⁷ *RW*, p. 71 Larkin refines this statement in 1985 “The Holiday stories are *awful*. Really, I can’t imagine the drug scene. My generation are drinkers and smokers; I wouldn’t stick a needle into myself for a hatful of golden guineas.” *SL*, p.749

in the same way as the Beats – as a personal authentication point – then it may not be too far off to suggest that Larkin's poetry is also influenced by that of Ginsberg's and Kerouac's generation. There seems to be a similarity in attitude, particularly in the context of jazz, the vernacular and four-letter words. Reviewing Lawrence Lipton's *The Holy Barbarians* in 1960 Larkin notes that next to the "normal syllabus requirements (art, not working, sex)" the Beat Generation was characterized by their passion for "jazz" and "a new slang".⁴²⁸ The Beats "exploited the rhythms and imagery and emotive power of the colloquial and the vernacular".⁴²⁹ Larkin believes in the power of the colloquial and the vernacular.

Somewhat surprisingly, Larkin and Allen Ginsberg take the same stance towards modernist poetry. Characterizing Pound's poetry, Ginsberg states: "Pound seems to me to be [...] fabricating out of his reading and out of the museum of literature."⁴³⁰ In 1963, Larkin writes to Monica Jones that Pound's weakness is "thinking that poetry is made out of poetry & not out of being alive."⁴³¹ Larkin rejects the "myth-kitty" of the modernists in the same way that "symbol and myth become dirty words in the lexicon of the New American Poets."⁴³² Sketching his literary motivation, Larkin writes in "Statement":

I write poems to preserve things I have seen/thought/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.⁴³³

Formulating a latent criticism of the modernist's intellectualizing of poetry, Ginsberg asserts a very similar standpoint:

⁴²⁸ RW, p. 117

⁴²⁹ Gregory Stephenson, *The Daybreak Boys: Essays on the Literature of the Beat Generation*, Southern Illinois University, 2009, p. 15

⁴³⁰ Allen Ginsberg, Interview with *Paris Review*, Spring 1966, No. 37, accessed online 25/04/2011 www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4389/the-art-of-poetry-no-8-allen-ginsberg

⁴³¹ LM, p. 318

⁴³² Thomas F. Merrill, *Allen Ginsberg*, Twayne Publishers Inc., New York, 1969, p. 44

⁴³³ RW, p. 79

there should be no distinction between what we write down, and what we really know, to begin with. As we know it every day, with each other. And the hypocrisy of literature has been – you know like there's supposed to be a formal literature, which is supposed to be different from...in subject, in diction and even in organization, from our quotidian inspired lives.⁴³⁴

The Beats used their jazz⁴³⁵ (which had already developed into bop by that time) to demonstrate their “knowingness about their own time and especially themselves”⁴³⁶ while they somewhat “half-consciously [...] discarded the body of Anglo-American poetic tradition and rooted about hoggishly in the grunts, oaths and nastier obscenity of American social wreckage.”⁴³⁷ Jazz and obscenities in the Beats’ poetry are an authentication point for the best minds of *their* generation and serve to stake their claims of hip versus square. Then again, there is perhaps not so much difference between the sentiment and the diction of Larkin’s “Aubade” and Ginsberg’s “When I think of death/I get a goofy feeling”.⁴³⁸ Tellingly in this context, the title of Ginsberg’s poem is “Bop Lyrics”. His contemporary Beat Lawrence Ferlinghetti is reported to have said about Ginsberg: “he is an old man perpetually writing a poem about an old man whose every third thought is death.”⁴³⁹ What is “extinctions’s alp” in Larkin becomes “For the world is a mountain/of shit: if it’s going to/be moved at all, it’s got/to be taken by handfuls” in Ginsberg’s “The Terms in Which I Think of Reality”.⁴⁴⁰ The sentiment in Larkin’s “For Sidney Bechet” and this part of Ginsberg’s “Howl” is not too different, either:

⁴³⁴ Merrill 1969, p. 45

⁴³⁵ A casual skimming of Ginsberg’s “Howl” alone renders multiple “jazz”-allusions in the same way that the protagonists of Kerouac’s *On the Road* often find themselves at jazz shows. The way the protagonist of Kerouac’s *The Dharma Bums* [2000 [1958], Penguin, London] appreciates jazz would not be out of place in one of Larkin’s letters: “one swinging Ella Fitzgerald album with Clark Terry very interesting on trumpet and a good three-speed Webcor phonograph that played loud enough to blast the roof off.”, p. 18 Interestingly, Ray Smith in *The Dharma Bums* also criticizes Pound: “Pound? Who wants to make a favourite poet out of that pretentious nut?”, p. 25

⁴³⁶ Fair 1977, p. 25

⁴³⁷ John McCormick, “Philip Larkin: An American View” in: *The Sewanee Review*, Vol. 102, No.1 (Winter, 1994), p. 133

⁴³⁸ Allen Ginsberg, *Collected Poems 1947-1985*, Penguin Books, London, 1995, p. 42

⁴³⁹ Quoted in: Merrill 1969, p. 37

⁴⁴⁰ Ginsberg 1995, p. 50

rose incarnate in the ghostly clothes of jazz in the goldhorn shadow
of the band and blew the suffering of America's naked mind for love
into an eli eli lamma lamma sabcthani saxophone cry that shivered
the cities down to the last radio
with the absolute heart of the poem of life butchered out of their own bodies/
good to eat a thousand years.⁴⁴¹

Whereas Larkin idealizes America as his extended “jazz room”, the concept of America in the poetry of the Beats remains bound up with a particular place and time. It is “the lost America of love” with “blue automobiles in driveways” from Ginsberg’s Whitman-poem “A Supermarket in California”.⁴⁴² This is why Charles Fair determines “little evidence, in their [the Beats’] work, of that historical sense”.⁴⁴³ Larkin, on the other hand, has the historical sense. He shares the authenticating features – jazz and the vernacular – with the Beats but has the cunning not to let them take over the poetry. He successfully straddles the line between Eliot’s tradition and the first spearheads of post-modernism; between his lyrical British roots and an offhand, personal engagement with American trends and genres.

In the first instance, Larkin’s use of four-letter words may be one of “the marks of a period in which [...] linguistic reticence has retreated”⁴⁴⁴, but his authentication through the vernacular occurs late enough for him to dodge all accusations of ‘just too late for Larkin’. Larkin is not trying to emulate the Beat Generation. He deliberately chooses a stylistic device to suit his poetry, irrespective of time or trend. It is thus that the stylistic device is abstracted from the limitations of a certain era or genre. The vernacular becomes timeless. T.S. Eliot classifies the time between 1922-1942 as “belonging to a period of search for a proper modern colloquial idiom.”⁴⁴⁵ Larkin is not hankering after

⁴⁴¹ Ibid., p. 131

⁴⁴² Ibid., p. 136

⁴⁴³ Fair 1977, p. 25

⁴⁴⁴ Roger Sharrock, “Private Faces in Public Places: The Poetry of Larkin and Lowell”, in: *English* (1987) 36 (155), p. 116

⁴⁴⁵ T.S. Eliot, “The Music of Poetry”, in: *Poets on Poetry*, Charles Norman (ed.), Collier-Macmillan Canada, Toronto, 1962, p. 347

the latest literary fashion; he makes conscious use of specific linguistic devices. Larkin takes his time to find his modern colloquial idiom.

“Wanking at ten past three” (would the speaker still be awake at the ‘blues hour’ of four o’ clock in the morning?) and “Someone else feeling her breast and cunt” in “Love Again” are not vernacular for the sake of it. They are not the expression of youthful rebellion or the demarcation of an in-group. On the contrary: here the vernacular highlights the acute and sharp pain of old-age jealousy and authenticates the poem’s sentiment instead of merely “suggesting a private, special group sharing a valuable kind of knowledge alien to the rest of us”⁴⁴⁶ as Rosenthal writes about Ginsberg. If “[M]odernism was a movement associated with scrupulous choice of artistic materials, and with hard work in arranging them”⁴⁴⁷, then Larkin is clearly guilty as charged. Still there is surely much in common between Ginsberg’s “narcissistic bitch” in “In Society” and the drivelling “bitch/Who’s read nothing but *Which*” in Larkin’s “Vers de Société”.

⁴⁴⁶ M.L. Rosenthal, *The New Poets American and British Poetry since World War II*, Oxford University Press, 1973, p. 112

⁴⁴⁷ Daniel Abright, Introduction, in: *T.S. Eliot's Orchestra Critical Essays on Poetry and Music*, John Xiros Cooper (ed.), Garland Publishing, New York, 2000, p. x

Chapter 6

'I prefer my own taste in these things': Larkin's American Frontier

Larkin's private passion for jazz shows a highly personal, largely positive response to America. His engagement with the poetry of the USA, both historical and contemporary, shows a more complex picture. In his more public writing America becomes a symbol for the extreme modernism of "the mad lads" to which he declared himself so averse. The picture is complicated by the invitations he received from American academic institutions to travel across the Atlantic. The USA in his later essays come to symbolise a characteristically transatlantic commodification and coarsening of culture. However, beneath the loud simplifications we can detect that in his poetry Larkin adopts a kind of temperate modernism which, paradoxically, owes much to specific influences from the USA. In this chapter I shall analyse how much of Larkin's poetry can be seen to have direct equivalents in the literary works of the leading American writers of the past, and of his own time.

Larkin characteristically plays down any connection between American poetry and his own work: "I'm afraid I know very little about American poetry."⁴⁴⁸ However, as we have seen in connection to jazz-related poetry, Larkin was by no means as ignorant of developments in American literature - pre- and post-modernism - as he claims. There are several American writers who have no place whatsoever on Larkin's American "list of hates". Walt Whitman is always, for instance, mentioned with warm affection. Writing to Monica Jones in 1966, Larkin states that he would "like to include *Whitman*"

⁴⁴⁸ RW, p. 70

in his *Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse*, but disqualifies him as “out of the period really”.⁴⁴⁹ Conceptualizing the volume, Larkin debates excluding American writers unless “they seemed to have had a demonstrable effect on the course of English poetry”⁴⁵⁰; Robert Frost appears to meet this criterion. In the event he excluded all American writers, apart from the naturalised English Eliot, and the naturalised American Auden.

Larkin acknowledges the significance of Whitman and Frost but little of their influence finds its way into his literary work. Confronted with a French (!) translation of his “Livings”, Larkin remarks to Anthony Thwaite “Quite Whitmanesque, isn’t it?”⁴⁵¹ but the fact that he associates one of the most important American poets with a poem in French once more highlights Larkin’s play with the concept of foreignness. Analysing Larkin’s reception in America, Bruce K. Martin sees Larkin realizing “Whitman’s aim of bridging gaps of age, nationality and social class”⁴⁵², but we have seen in the previous chapters how Larkin himself has formulated this specific aim. Blake Morrison detects a parallel⁴⁵³ between Frost’s “Directive” and Larkin’s “Church Going”, but the similarity between Frost’s “a house in earnest” and Larkin’s “a serious house on serious earth” remains largely coincidental – the speakers in the respective poems make “a visit to a place fallen into disuse”, but that is about all they have in common. If one forced the comparison of Frost’s “Directive”, the redeeming nature of the water – “Drink and be whole again beyond confusion” from the “goblet from the children’s playhouse” is much closer to Larkin’s “glass of water/Where any-angled light/Would congregate endlessly” in his poem “Water”. John Osborne suggests a Whitmanesque echo in

⁴⁴⁹ *LM*, p. 358

⁴⁵⁰ *SL*, p. 381

⁴⁵¹ *SL*, p. 497

⁴⁵² Bruce K. Martin, “Larkin’s Humanity Viewed from Abroad”, in: *Philip Larkin The Man and his Work*, Dale Salwak (ed.), The Macmillan Press Ltd., Houndmills, Basingstoke and London, 1989, p. 140

⁴⁵³ Blake Morrison, ““Still Going On, All of It’: The Movement in the 1950s and the Movement Today”, in: *Leader* 2009, p. 26

Larkin's "Days". He implies that the "priest and the doctor" running across the field in their long coats in Larkin's poem reach back to section 40 in Whitman's "Song Of Myself", but while the speaker in Whitman's long poem heroically rescues the sick and poor in an almost biblical way, Larkin's speaker poses another finely honed riddle – much like in "The Building" – whose final, bitter-sweet answer is death.

In his review "Big Victims: Emily Dickinson and Walter de la Mare" from 1970, Larkin reviews Emily Dickinson's *Complete Poems*, but has very little to say either pro or contra Dickinson's work. In comparison with Walter de la Mare's *Complete Poems* Larkin merely denotes Dickinson as "more striking".⁴⁵⁴ This, however, is not on account of the quality of her poetry, but on adopting "the matter of childhood" into her poetry. Larkin shows himself favourable to some aspects of Dickinson's poetry, but comes to conclude that she remains "perpetually unfinished and wilfully eccentric".⁴⁵⁵

Larkin defends J.D. Salinger's 1951 novel "The Catcher in the Rye" against Monica Jones's criticism: "I'm sorry you feel so much against the *Catcher*" sketching how he did not like it at first, but came to "enjoy [...] it a lot." He admits that the novel is "a book with no proper plot", but is nonetheless convinced by "the language&conversation" that "seem real enough"⁴⁵⁶ to him. Larkin's affinity to real language, the colloquial and vernacular is once more underlined: while the Beat poets seem to claim the use of the vernacular exclusively for themselves, there are "237 instances of 'goddamn', 58 uses of the synonym for a person of illegitimate birth, 31 'Chrissakes' in Salinger's novel."⁴⁵⁷ In his routine of drinking and listening to records, Larkin likens himself to Hart Crane who "used to behave similarly, but he used to write

⁴⁵⁴ *RW*, p. 191

⁴⁵⁵ *RW*, p. 195

⁴⁵⁶ *LM*, p. 242

⁴⁵⁷ Stephen J. Whitfield, "Cherished and Cursed: Toward a Social History of *The Catcher in the Rye*" in: *New England Quarterly* 70, 1997, p. 598

poetry, wch I confess escapes me at the moment.”⁴⁵⁸

Larkin's opinions become more decisive and also more complex in his comments on the major American Modernists. He criticises Ezra Pound for “thinking that poetry is made out of poetry & not out of being alive.”⁴⁵⁹ He takes his line here from his undergraduate tutor Gavin Bone who referred to Eliot with Oxford disdain as “an American critic”⁴⁶⁰ long after the works in question were established as classics. Larkin harshly judged the American Auden as “too verbose to be memorable and too intellectual to be moving.”⁴⁶¹ For Larkin, the idol of his youth had lost his voice when he emigrated to America. Interestingly, Robert Frost is reported to have said something rather similar about T.S. Eliot when he made the reverse move to Auden's: “Eliot has left us and [...] he's never really found them [the English].”⁴⁶²

However, Larkin's response to his chance meeting with Eliot in the Faber & Faber office seems to contradict this negative impression. He recalled “a shattering few minutes: I hardly remember what I thought.”⁴⁶³ Indeed, Eliot features prominently (with nine long poems) in Larkin's selection for *The Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse* which

is more broadly inclusive than Yeats's in the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* and more centrally representative of the modernist Eliot in particular: it is Larkin, not Yeats, who prints “Prufrock” and *The Waste Land*.⁴⁶⁴

Preparing the *Oxford Book*, Larkin writes to Monica Jones about Eliot: “silly book-drunk buffer though he is, he has *dignity*”.⁴⁶⁵ A Larkinesque ambiguity of statement is apparent here. It is not Eliot, the book-drunk buffer, Larkin despises. It is the perceived

⁴⁵⁸ *SL*, p. 278

⁴⁵⁹ *LM*, p. 318

⁴⁶⁰ Quoted in: Timms 1973, p. 6

⁴⁶¹ *RW*, p. 123

⁴⁶² Quoted in: Richard Poirier, *Robert Frost The Work of Knowing*, Stanford University Press, 1977, p. 45

⁴⁶³ *RW*, p. 67

⁴⁶⁴ Rawson in: Singh 1996, p. 38

⁴⁶⁵ *LM*, p. 402

chaos of Modernism, fostered by Pound, to which Larkin is averse. Stripping away the elements of collage from, say, *The Waste Land*, leaves enough of traditional poetry for Larkin to appreciate. Robert Conquest states, in a late retrospective essay on the Movement phenomenon: “We had, indeed, all been brought up on, and had digested, ‘Modernism’ of every type.”⁴⁶⁶ It is no coincidence that Conquest employs the plural “Modernisms” in his essay’s title. There is the early jazz modernism of Bechet and Armstrong that Larkin loves set against that of Charlie Parker’s – that paranoiac drug addict” – a modernism of atonal improvisation that “wrecked jazz.”⁴⁶⁷ Then there is a kind of continuous debate between what might be caricatured as Pound’s ‘frontier’, experimental American modernism in literature and the young Eliot’s more tempered version of European modernism.

Despite all his grumblings against the “myth-kitty” and “the mad lads”, motifs and tones from Eliot feature largely in Larkin; and the American poet is one of the strongest direct influences on his development. It is intriguing that the Auden-*aficionado* Larkin who discredited his erstwhile hero for losing his very own poetic voice when he went to the USA should endorse the poetry of an expatriate American who – according to Robert Frost – had also lost his poetic voice when he emigrated to Europe. Interestingly, Eliot saw himself as the modern American in Europe, not as an Englishman among Englishmen. Asked by his friend Mary Hutchinson to bring his metaphorical “lute” to a social occasion, Eliot replied in a letter: “But it is a jazz-banjo that I should bring, not a lute.”⁴⁶⁸ David Chinitz convincingly suggests that with this reply “Eliot bases himself in America rather than Europe, in the contemporary rather than the classical,

⁴⁶⁶ Robert Conquest, “New Lines, Movements, and Modernisms” in: *The Movement Reconsidered*, Zachary Leader (ed.), Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 307

⁴⁶⁷ *RW*, p. 72

⁴⁶⁸ Quoted in: David E. Chinitz, *T.S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide*, The University of Chicago Press, 2005, p. 21

and in the 'jazz movement' of modernism rather than the Great Tradition."⁴⁶⁹ Eliot casts himself as the "foxtrotting American" in England and jokingly refers to his very own "Amurrican culcher." It is thus, Chinitz argues, that Eliot "brought the potency of the popular to his art. It was here, as much as in his formal innovations or in his urban imagery, that Eliot's modernism lay."⁴⁷⁰ If this American's modernism designates the parameters of modernism as a consolidation of the "potency of the popular", "formal innovations" (a certain daringness in diction falls under this header) and "urban imagery", then Larkin is as modern(ist) as Eliot.

John Osborne picks lines and images from throughout Larkin's entire *oeuvre* to reconstruct a Larkinesque 'Movement' version of "Prufrock". Strangely, he overlooks the fact that Larkin's unpublished and unfinished "The Dance" is clearly a version of "Prufrock". Indeed "The Dance", atypical of Larkin's work in so many ways, is also remarkable for its extended intertextual relationship with Eliot's poem, which haunts it from beginning to end. It could almost be read, on a post-Modernist level, as homage to the American poet.

Larkin's "The Dance" stands out from the rest of his *oeuvre* in attempting to inhabit the social world both of the Laforguean misfit and of Eliot's Prufrock. Here is a speaker who – albeit grudgingly – dresses up for a social occasion at which he is expected. The occasion is not a more or less casual get-together at someone's home as sketched in "Vers de Société", neither is it the comfortable anonymity of a bigger social event as in "Show Saturday". Indeed, "The Dance" can be seen as a variation on Larkin's 1953 poem "Reasons for Attendance". The key difference, however, is that in "Reasons for Attendance" the call to sociability can still be countered by "that lifted, rough-tongued

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 21

⁴⁷⁰ David Chinitz, "Jazz-Banjo, Not a Lute: Eliot and Popular Music before *The Waste Land*", in: Cooper 2000, p. 10

bell/(Art, if you like)”; the speaker watches “the dancers – all under twenty-five - /Shifting intently” in a familiar Larkinesque gesture behind the safety of the “the lighted glass” of a window, but ultimately does not join them. While the dancers are happy in their togetherness, the speaker’s happiness lies in the pursuit of art – “if no one has misjudged himself. Or lied.” “The Dance” dispels the speaker’s safe distance. While the speaker in “Reasons for Attendance” merely happens upon the dance because he hears the “trumpet’s voice”, the speaker in “The Dance” is attending on purpose despite his reservations. He attends because he is required to – “Professional colleagues do/Assemble socially” – and because there is some personal pressure to be there: “All this, simply to be where you are.”

James Booth demonstrates how “The Dance” is “the final poem in [Larkin’s] long marriage debate begun with ‘Deep Analysis’ in 1946.”⁴⁷¹ What is more interesting, however, is how this poem ending a debate that flares up repeatedly in Larkin’s *oeuvre* suggests such striking parallels with the difficulties with girls experienced by Eliot’s “Prufrock”. Larkin’s “The Dance” perhaps returns to Eliot to toll the rough-tongued bell of art one last time setting the scene for the final climax for his debate of art vs. life. Though Eliot’s and Larkin’s choice is essentially the same, “The Dance” is thus far removed from being one of those poems that “are born of other poems.”⁴⁷² We have seen already that Larkin is not averse to writing poetry about art as long as the fact itself does not corrupt the poem *per se*. “The Dance” thus approximates an “Englishing” in Everett’s sense; a translation as approximation not necessarily into a different culture but in a different poetic context demonstrating Larkin’s view that poetry is written “for people with the same background”⁴⁷³ as the poet.

⁴⁷¹ Booth 2005, p. 101

⁴⁷² *RW*, p. 89

⁴⁷³ *RW*, p. 69

Both poems sketch a social occasion the male speaker is unwilling to attend but eventually attends for the sake of the woman he is going to meet there. Both speakers hesitate to make commitments and engage in all kinds of panicked, self-conscious thought. In the same way that the speaker in “Prufrock” addresses the reader – “Let us go and make our visit” – the reader in “The Dance” directly addresses if not the reader, then someone who is bound to share his opinion. The address “brother” and the tone of complicity imply that the addressee is male. The simple enumeration “drink, sex and jazz” conjures up the “selfish” places of “Best Society” or, more explicitly, the “selfish” pleasure of “good jazz/With drinks for further orders” from “‘None of the books have time’.”⁴⁷⁴ It is clear, that “the dance”, ironically underlined by the inverted commas, can only be a parody of “drink, sex and jazz”. The way the speaker in “The Dance” gets ready for the big occasion is very similar to Prufrock's preparations in Eliot's poem. While in “Prufrock” the speaker “prepare[s] a face to meet the faces that you meet”⁴⁷⁵, the speaker in “The Dance” contemplates “The shame of evening trousers, evening tie” in the “darkening mirror”. In Larkin, “the sun is low” while in Eliot “the evening is spread out against the sky”. However, in Eliot it is “a soft October night”, in Larkin “White candles stir within the chestnut trees” which indicates a night in late spring or early summer. At the end of the first stanza in Larkin there is a new addressee: the speaker goes through all the pains of preparation “simply to be where you are”. It is interesting to see that Eliot with his recurring, but still occasional rhymes remains in *vers libre* while Larkin rigorously obeys the regular rhyme scheme abcbdededa in its thirteen (!) stanzas. It is perhaps no coincidence that “The Dance” is - despite being unfinished - Larkin's longest poem.

⁴⁷⁴ Larkin writes to Monica Jones in April 1966: “I think it is funny the way my idea of happiness is to be listening, part-drunk, to jazz.” *LM*, p. 374

⁴⁷⁵ T.S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1962*, Faber and Faber Ltd., London, 1974, pp. 3-7

Before arriving at the venue of the social gathering, Larkin's speaker is still unsure whether he really wants to be there: in a nice twist of the phrasing he is "Half willing, half abandoning the will" in the same way as "Prufrock" ponders whether there is "Time to turn back and descend the stair." The stairs in "Prufrock" are the "specious steps" in "The Dance". But whereas there is merely "music from a farther room" in Eliot, the contrast between "sweet jazz" and the music the speaker is forced to endure at the dance runs through Larkin's entire poem. The good kind of music, the jazz from the very first line, turns into the "faint thudding stridency" of the band at the dance. The third stanza details "the noise". The escapist idea of "listening to records" in the fourth stanza is contrasted with "the deafening band". In the fifth stanza, there is "mock jazz"; in the sixth stanza the "snarl of music"; in the seventh "the band re-starts" once more, in a longing aside offset by parenthesis contrasted with "(Drink, sex and jazz)." Indeed, the alternative sketch of how the evening could have gone had the speaker just stayed in with his records, shortened to the three keywords "drink, jazz and sex", persists as an undercurrent in the poem until in stanza eight the speaker gets a grip on himself: "I breathe in, deeply."

But before that, the speaker has to muster the courage to climb the stairs. That the "lit-up windows" (compare the "lighted glass" of "Reasons for Attendance"; there is still time to bolt) seem to him "a final warning" corresponds to "Prufrock's" repeated question: "Do I dare?" The ominous atmosphere in "The Dance" is enforced by the personification of large cars which "Scan my approach". The idea of time running out that also permeates "Prufrock" is here emphasized by the slow waning of the light: in the first stanza "The sun is low"; in the second stanza "The light has almost failed." This is the less elaborate version of Eliot's imagery that likens the evening to a cat that "Curled once about the house, and fell asleep."

The first person plural pronoun “we” is to be seen in invisible inverted commas as the speaker mimics the exclamation of those in his department – after all, this is an occasion for “Professional colleagues” – who were organising the dance. The same is true for the possessive pronoun at the beginning of the third stanza, “Our same familiar barn ballooned and chained”. “Barn” is clearly derogatory and “chained” is ambiguous; it refers both to the garlands (paper chains?) decorating the room, but also carries a hint of menace. The place has about it something of a torture chamber which is in line with the idea of an insect “sprawling on a pin” in Eliot’s poem. The speaker in “The Dance” is panicked when he finally enters the room. Art does not sound its bell to save him. The way Larkin’s speaker “edge[s] along the noise [...] lacking the poise/To look about” him is a striking parallel to the underwater imagery of Prufrock who “should have been a pair of ragged claws/Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.” It is interesting to see how some calm sets in as soon as the speaker has been served at the bar: “maturer calm/Permits a leaning-back”. This is as close as the poet gets to the evening he dreamed up before: “drink, sex and jazz”. Interestingly, the choice of words “maturer” here once more underlines the speaker’s insecurity: he is a grown man but still disproportionately - almost childishly - scared of engaging with others. Again and again in Larkin, the drink is not only firmly connected to social occasions but also serves as a kind of solace in the “exile of small-talk”. In “Sympathy in White Major”, the gin and tonic that is prepared in “foaming gulps” is the last stand of poetry against a community who does not understand art. In “Vers de Société” the drink served – “a glass of washing sherry” – cannot counter “the drivel of some bitch” and in the bitterly resigned “Aubade”, the “furnace-fear” awaits “when we are caught without/People or drink.” Significantly, Eliot’s poem does not offer this dubious alcoholic solace: in “Prufrock” there is a never-ending ordeal of tea after tea (“toast and tea”, “after tea and cake”, “the

cups, the marmalade, the tea”).

In Eliot, “the women come and go” while Larkin’s speaker watches a “harmoniously-shifting crowd” from the safety of the bar. Again, this is an echo of “Reasons for Attendance” in which the dancers are “shifting intently, face to flushed face”. In a typical Larkinesque pose, the speaker does not belong. The crowd may shift harmoniously to music, but as the speaker has identified the music as “noise” already, not comparable to the solitary pleasure of actual jazz, he cannot possibly be part of this crowd. His gaze, however, zooms in. The “whole [...] crowd” becomes “some people at some table” – the repeated use of “some” demonstrating not only his lack of interest but also his “maturer calm”; he is preparing “a face to meet the faces that you meet” – and finally zooms in on “you”. Significantly, the “you” is cut off from the rest of the table by a comma. In the same way as Prufrock frequently asks himself “do I dare?” does Larkin’s speaker ask himself “Why gulp?” only to reassure himself that attending a work-related social occasion “is normal and allowed”. This stands in sharp contrast to the beginning of the stanza where the speaker is seemingly discouraged to carry on by the floor which “reverberates as with alarm: / *Not you, not here.*”

Just as Prufrock is shaken by a kind of social ennui – “I have known them all already, known them all” – the speaker in Larkin has to convince himself that occasions like this are indeed normal: “sitting dressed like this, in rooms like these”. The non-specific generalization “in rooms like these” mirrors Prufrock’s chorus “In the room the women come and go”. Here, among the never ending parade of teas and coffee spoons, it may well be another room every time he mentions it. Larkin’s speaker is not used to Prufrock’s reality of social gathering after social gathering. The zooming-in technique Larkin uses here is almost cinematically visible: solitary man at bar in the din of music and the babble of voices casually scans the room, finds the table and the group, singles

out the woman and waits “until you look my way, and then/Grinning my hopes, I stalk your chair”. The choice of words here is meaningful: “grinning my hopes” sounds forced, as if the speaker has wilfully to arrange his features in a grin - significantly not a natural smile - before he “stalks” over. He does not walk, he does not stride, he does not shimmy in tune with the music – his movements and expressions betray his discomfort.

This discomfort is amplified by the reaction - imagined or real - of the group sitting at the table: “raised faces/Sag into silence at my standing there”. This is the same evaluating that Prufrock dreads: “eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,/And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,/When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall”. Larkin often employs the synecdoche “face” or “faces” when his speakers, almost autistically, cannot make sense of what is happening around them. In “Vers de Société” the social occasion is broken down into “forks and faces” (Prufrock similarly enumerates “tea and cakes and ices”) and in “The Building” “faces” denote expressionless features of a forced community without human warmth. Similarly, Prufrock prepares “a face to meet the faces that you meet”. The faces mirror human emotions, like or dislike. If the speaker cannot read them because they remain blank to him he will naturally be at a loss; literally lost in a crowd. In “The Dance”, however, there is a subtext: “your eyes greet me over commonplaces”. It is an official occasion so open confessions of an emotional relationship are not asked for. As I have already noted elsewhere, there is no communication between the “you and me” in the poem. There are commonplaces, but they are not rendered in direct speech and everything is communicated by the eyes. Significantly perhaps, these “hazel” ones should be “half-shut” when the speaker and the woman take to the dance floor a second time in the twelfth stanza. Eliot’s Prufrock also dreads what eyes should communicate: “eyes that fix you”.

Without further explicit communication the speaker takes the woman, “you”, to the dance floor, noticing with a jolt that “your arms are bare” in an aside which only adds to his insecurity. Interestingly, Prufrock has “known the arms already [...] / Arms that are braceleted and white and bare”. Just as the speaker in “The Dance” “stalked” over to the woman’s chair, he now takes to the dance floor “clumsily”. The non-verbal communication continues: “Your look is challenging / And not especially friendly.” One would grant the speaker a loving welcome after all his insecurities but this is not to happen. Instead, his insecurity strengthens: “everything I look to for protection – the mock jazz / The gilt-edged Founder, through the door / The ‘running buffet supper’ – grows less real” as they are dancing. The “running buffet supper” becomes even less glamorous in comparison with Eliot’s “teas and cakes and ices”. Significantly, the open door through which the speaker in “The Dance” sees the buffet, offers neither protection nor escape. He is turning on the dance floor without any hope of leaving it before the song is over.

As he is looking for escape from the communicating eyes of his dancing partner – an even less verbal subtext makes itself apparent: “Suddenly it strikes me you are acting more / Than ever you would put in words”. The speaker is left to find for himself what his dancing partner is trying to communicate without words much in the same way that all Prufrock ever receives in direct speech is the cryptic: “That is not it at all, / That is not what I meant at all.” And just like Prufrock who is contemplating “the overwhelming question” and wonders whether it would be right to “drop a question on your plate”, Larkin’s speaker suddenly feels “a tremendous answer banging back / As if I’d asked a question.” Exactly as in “Prufrock”, the speaker here does *not* ask the question but has to negotiate the consequences of this. But while in “Prufrock”, there is still “some talk of you and me”; in “The Dance” there is “A whole consenting language” hidden under

the “few permitted movements of the dance”. The speaker cannot shake off the impact of the “tremendous answer”, is momentarily, “acutely transitory” “describing love”, wondering “Why not snatch it?” but ultimately fails to communicate this.

The non-verbal exchange is almost brought to a climax; then communication and the song cease: “Your fingers tighten, tug,/Then slacken altogether.” – “This is not what I meant at all.” This particular dance is over and the speaker is “caught by some shoptalking shit”. While every detail, cars, stairs and drink, was clear on the way in, the speaker seems to be caught in a whirlwind of impressions and is no longer at all on top of things. The “shoptalking shit” leads the speaker “off to supper” as if he himself has lost all initiative. He does not even have the strength not to engage with “the shit” and “his bearded” wife, listens to their talk without listening, holds a coffee as if it was an alien object (note the neologistic adjective “coffee-holding” – is he measuring out his life with coffee spoons?) and still ponders on the moment of unspoken communication: “whether that serious restlessness was what you meant”. “What you meant” clearly echoes the repeated exclamation “That is not what I meant at all” from “Prufrock”. The speaker knows exactly what the question is in the same way that Prufrock rolls around the question in his mind, but both are too terrified of the consequences to pronounce – propose! – it.

Larkin's speaker peculiarly “eel[s] back to the bar” once more mirroring Prufrock's scuttling motion on “the floors of silent seas” while he watches with sudden pangs of jealousy the unspecified “you” dance with “a weed from Plant Psychology”. Once more everything between the speaker and the woman is communicated wordlessly: “you looked at me”. He still cannot muster the courage for the appropriate communication. Prufrock similarly asks himself “Do I dare?”. In “The Dance”, the speaker reflects on how undignified his jealousy is – “people half [his] age” know how to deal with it

whereas he is consumed by it. While the speaker in “The Dance” reflects on the “sickening breathlessness of being young” that threatens to overwhelm him, Prufrock – much to the same effect – looks at things the other way: “I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,/And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat.” The abstract social image of the cloakroom is made concrete again in Larkin. The party slowly disperses and “Couples in their coats/Are leaving gaps already”. The speaker’s own coat “patiently hanging” is set against the speaker’s sudden decision to leave: “*Ring for a car right now.*”

But like Prufrock caught between teacups and coffee spoons there is no escape: as the speaker tries to leave, “your lot are waving” – the impersonal generalisation of “your lot” once more reminiscent of the panic the speakers here and in “Prufrock” feel at being labelled and categorized – he has to return to the table and start the ordeal all over again. He starts to enumerate all the irrelevant topics of conversation before he cuts himself short: “ – but why/Enumerate?”. This seems to be a deliberate reaction to “Prufrock”; the speaker in Eliot’s poem constantly enumerates, often with the additional conjunctive “and”: “arms [...] braceleted and white and bare”, “tea and cakes and ices”, “wept and fasted, wept and prayed”, “the cups, the marmalade, the tea”, “the sunsets and the dooryards and the sprinkled streets” etc.

The speaker in the poem is once more compelled to dance with the addressee of his poem, at a loss like Prufrock. He is confronted again by his dancing partner’s “silent beckoning” to which he is unable to reply. Despite the beckoning having lost in intensity, looking into the eyes of his dancing partner conjures up the panic-inducing future of “Endless receding Saturdays” and “never-resting hair-dos”, in short, of days with social occasions like this very dance. Prufrock is almost resigned but shares the sentiment: “I have known them already, known them all -/Have known the evenings,

mornings, afternoons,/I have measured out my life with coffee spoons". In the same way in which Prufrock cannot see any escape from an endless recession of social occasions the speaker in "The Dance" feels threatened by exactly this blueprint of a future as a married man. It is this panic that keeps both speakers from formulating the ultimate question.

"The Dance" is thus Larkin's version of Eliot's "Prufrock". We have noted before that snatches of popular song appear time and time in both Laforgue's and Eliot's poetry. David Chinitz even goes as far as to state: "Laforgue showed Eliot how to adapt his voice to the popular material around him, and jazz gave Eliot a way to bring Laforgue into contemporary English."⁴⁷⁶ Maybe, just maybe, with "The Dance", Larkin brings Eliot into contemporary English.

In the same way that Larkin's jazz merely conjures up an idea of America in the safe confines of Larkin's British living-room, the modernism of Eliot's pre-*Waste Land* work appears as accessible and acceptable to Larkin. Just like jazz its American culture remains comfortably out of reach while the "potency of the popular" radiates – perhaps via Laforgue *and* via jazz – into Larkin's living-room. In an untitled Eliot poem from 1911, the speaker in a Parisian cabaret witnesses live music which leads him to exclaim: "That's the stuff!"⁴⁷⁷ which is strangely reminiscent of Larkin's "Oh, play that thing!" in "For Sidney Bechet". It is hardly a coincidence that Larkin's "The Dance" incorporates a musical theme that also chimes in "Prufrock". While Larkin condemns Parker and Pound as wretched modern Americans, Eliot does not make Larkin's list of American hates in the Introduction to *All What Jazz*. Larkin despises neither Americans nor America. What Larkin criticizes – underlined by his disappointed critique of the American Auden – is the American commodification of culture, of poets in lecture halls

⁴⁷⁶ Chinitz in: Cooper 2000, p. 17

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid., p.17

piling up money instead of creating art.

Larkin's most well-known responses to American culture are on a less refinedly literary level than his engagement with Eliot's poetry. Larkin implicitly criticises Auden for adopting the techniques of modernism – “poetry about other poems” – when he went to America in 1939: “suddenly, instead of the occasional reference to Marx and Freud, you get every kind of writer stuffed in. He [Auden] became very much an intellectual and eclectic poet.”⁴⁷⁸ Auden suddenly wrote the kind of poetry that needed explanation. Furthermore, Auden embarks on lecture tours in the US, explaining poetry. Auden wrote his account of lecture tours around the colleges and universities of the USA, “On the Circuit” perhaps as a reaction to Larkin's “Naturally the Foundation will Bear Your Expenses” and published it in *About the House* in 1965. The fact that Larkin characterizes his own poem as “a dig at the middleman who gives a lot of talks to America and then brushes them up and does them on the Third and then brushes them up again and puts them out as a book with Chatto”⁴⁷⁹ underlines how Larkin's perception of scholars “explaining poetry” is closely linked with an American perspective.

When “Posterity” was published in *The New Statesmen* in June 1968, Larkin wrote to Monica Jones asking for her judgement on “Posterity” and “Sad Steps”: “How did you think the poems looked?”⁴⁸⁰ continuing: “I like them drunk, prefer *Posterity* sober. It must be the title. It gets in Yanks, Yids, wives, kids, Coca Cola, Protest, & the Theatre – pretty good list of hates, eh?” That Larkin's private “list of hates” should include Americans – “Yanks”, the idea of protest connected with the American hippie movement in reaction to the Vietnam War culminating at the Woodstock music festival

⁴⁷⁸ *FR*, p. 30

⁴⁷⁹ *FR*, p. 25

⁴⁸⁰ *LM*, p. 387

in 1969 and that red and white epitome of Americanness – Coca Cola – connects nicely with Larkin's critique of the American literary circuit.

In his acceptance speech of the Shakespeare Prize in Hamburg in 1976 – “only the second time since 1945 that I have been abroad”, Larkin criticized “the American, or Ford-car, view of literature”⁴⁸¹ in which every poem is taken from the general pool of all existing poems “in the same way that a Ford Zephyr has somewhere in it a Ford Model T.”⁴⁸² With an implicit criticism of Eliot's “Tradition and the Individual Talent” Larkin takes his position against the (American) commodification of literary culture in which the poet is not only limited and pressured by the existence of a myriad of other poems but also by the expectations of the reading public. Somewhat surprisingly, the American poet Karl Shapiro shares this sentiment: “Modern American poetry is rightly called academic; it's textbook poetry, good for teaching....But nobody reads it except around examination time.”⁴⁸³ Daniel Wright notes in 1965 that “[c]ontemporary American poetry [...] – thanks to the excessive interest taken in it by American universities – is now an industry rather than an art.”⁴⁸⁴ It is the American way to take poetry to “the concert hall and the lecture room”⁴⁸⁵, to find new audiences and monetary gain in the poetry business thus warping the idea of genuine art to fit a commercial model. As a librarian in Hull, Larkin fights back on the academic level, as Californian Richard Moore remembers from a conversation with Larkin in Hull:

One of the concerns he [Larkin] expressed to me was that Americans were buying up England's literary papers because they had more money. His defense, as he described it, was to identify what young Americans were writing that should last and get first dibs on their estates. I asked him who he was looking at and he said...Charles Bukowski.⁴⁸⁶

⁴⁸¹ *RW*, p.89/90

⁴⁸² Quoted in: Morrison in Leader 2009, p. 21

⁴⁸³ Quoted in: Seymour Krim (ed.), *The Beats*, Fawcett Publications, Robbinsdale, 1963, p. 9

⁴⁸⁴ Quoted in: Rosenthal 1973, p. 198

⁴⁸⁵ *RW*, p. 89

⁴⁸⁶ accessed online 16/04/2011 www.igreens.org.uk/larkin_in_1977.htm

In this context, Eliot's idea of all of Europe's poems entering into the work of a new poem is interestingly less of a cultural commodification than the idea of creating poetry for the lecture circuit with the obvious aim of making money.

"Posterity", written in 1968, is a demonstration of Larkin's point, albeit from a slightly different perspective: it is not the poet himself who twists himself in order to meet the demands of the lecture circuit, but the poet's biographer, Jake Balokowsky, who writes about the poet, an "old-type *natural* fouled-up" guy for tenure instead of pursuing his own modernist literary interests. A funded study-leave to write about "Protest Theater" for Larkin is as absurd an idea as picturing himself in a letter to Monica Jones as "a Yank, writing a thesis on the water-imagery in Ezra Pound."⁴⁸⁷ "Posterity" thus fights two fronts. On the one hand, it criticizes the pseudo-intellectual literary business in (American) lecture halls; on the other hand it lashes out at the self-importance of the poet: "my biographer". It is no coincidence that "Posterity" is the only poem in Larkin's mature *oeuvre* in which the speaker refers to himself in the objectivizing voice of another.

The poem incorporates complex perspectives. The poet, himself the object of Balokowsky's research, is the speaker introducing Balokowsky as "my biographer". Curiously, the speaker then steps into the background as he lays out a scene in a university. Archie Burnett identifies "Kennedy" as John F. Kennedy University in California, but also indicates that Larkin picked the name as a random typical Americanism.⁴⁸⁸ Interestingly, Larkin commonly chooses California as the place where European literary scholars go in order to teach and make money. Writing to Monica Jones about the novelist Christopher Isherwood who had emigrated to Hollywood in 1939, Larkin includes the lines "Chaps who live in California/'s Books get cornier and

⁴⁸⁷ *LM*, p. 384

⁴⁸⁸ Burnett 2012, p. 460

cornier.”⁴⁸⁹ Mocking the critic Donald Davie’s move to California, Larkin writes a parody of the song “California, here I come”⁴⁹⁰ in which he pokes fun at the absurdity of research projects: “My thesis/On faeces/In *Ulysses*”⁴⁹¹ and derides them as mere quirks. These responses inform “Posterity”.

Meanwhile, Jake Balokowsky relates the circumstances of his “stinking dead” research to no-one in particular. Larkin plays with a typical American lack of reserve: Balokowsky is presumably talking to an academic colleague, possibly another poor lecturer who shares the “air-conditioned cell”, refers to his wife with her first name and relates personal plans and opinions. His counterpart in the conversation is merely allowed to squeeze in a moderately interested question in the third and last stanza. Balokowsky’s communicativeness is the direct opposite of Larkin’s regular speakers: they tend not to communicate with others. Larkin wrote to Richard Murphy that “the idea of the poem was imagining the ironical situation in which one’s posthumous reputation was entrusted to somebody as utterly unlike oneself as could be”, only to qualify this statement that Balokowsky’s “wanting to do one thing but having to something else, was really not so unlike me.”⁴⁹²

The setting of the poem inside an “air-conditioned cell at Kennedy” firmly establishes an American background which is enhanced by the American diction. Balokowsky is wearing “jeans and sneakers”, he talks about family as “folks”, his research is “stinking dead”, there is a “Coke dispenser”, the common exclamation of exasperation is “Christ”, Balokowsky has taken “Freshman” courses and the presence of an air-conditioning system hints at the Californian heat. Heat is something Larkin associates with America from the stories of the Belfast lecturer Alec Dalgarno: “His stories of

⁴⁸⁹ Burnett 2012, p. 302, notes p. 632

⁴⁹⁰ Quoted in: Burnett 2012, p. 654

⁴⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 318

⁴⁹² Motion 1993, p. xviii-xix

America sound much what one expects – he says he didn't sleep properly ever all the time he was there, partly due to radio-controlled taxis booming about the streets all night, partly due to the heat.”⁴⁹³

Jake Balokowsky is an American through and through. He is affectionately irreverent towards the object of his studies, whom he needs to put “on the skids” in order to fulfill his job requirements and keep “Myra” and the “kids” happy. Balokowsky becomes an emblem of the criticism Larkin expresses in his Shakespeare Prize speech: the American view of literature has become a question of commercial gain. The “money sign” Balokowsky makes is tellingly placed almost at the centre of the poem. The embracing rhymes in the regular six-line stanza abcbca hint at the desperate situation not only for Jake Balokowsky stuck with the “old fart” of a writer but also at the restricted situation for poets and writers enslaved to the lecture circuit.

The speaker of “Posterity” corresponds to the jet-setting lecturer in Larkin's “Naturally The Foundation Will Bear Your Expenses” from 1961 which is later mirrored in Auden's “On The Circuit”. The final lines of Auden's poem “God bless the U.S.A, so large/So friendly, and so rich” become even more ironic in the present context. Larkin endorses the image of the lecturer and his readings as part of the “mangy crew” that interpose themselves “between the simple reader & the Word.”⁴⁹⁴ The satiric sentiment “No-one should read without his help again” in the deliberately plain couplets of Larkin's unpublished “A Lecturer in drip-dry shirt arrayed”⁴⁹⁵ re-surfaces again in “Naturally...” and “Posterity” in slightly less conspicuous form. The destination of the “*Lecturer* in drip-dry shirt arrayed” (the capital letter and the italics are literally dripping with irony) can only be the USA: “To teach creative writing in the

⁴⁹³ *LM*, p. 118

⁴⁹⁴ Quoted in: Burnett 2012, p. 625

⁴⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 298

States.” The neologism “Mythologising-up a few main works” underlines how absurd guided reading appears to Larkin. Much like the “water-imagery in Pound” in the letter to Monica Jones and the “thesis on faeces in Ulysses”⁴⁹⁶, Larkin delights in mimicking the absurdity of titles given to academic talks and theses: here it is “*Yeats: the Language of the Will*” and “*Myth and Image: Wordsworth's Daffodil*”. The lecturer in his drip-dry shirt is “good at getting fees and perks” and the literary business takes away the direct impression of literature and poetry for the sake of academic babblings and money. In “Posterity” the prototype of “A Lecturer in drip-dry shirt arrayed” and the protagonist of “Naturally...” come to a head. The young hip academic Jake Balokowsky in his sneakers and jeans with a can of Coke in his hand and his American diction embodies everything that is wrong with the American literary business.

Larkin's American (jazz) Dream thus turns into an “American Nightmare” in the context of his theoretical and poetic criticism of the American literary scene. In his Shakespeare Prize speech Larkin chooses a similar image: “the lecture circuit suddenly comes to resemble one of those other circuits described in Dante's *Inferno*.”⁴⁹⁷ “Yanks” of Balokowsky's calibre are on Larkin's “list of hates” for a reason. For that same reason, Pound and Auden also feature on that list.

Larkin returns to Jake Balokowsky eight years later in 1976, addressing “Dear Jake” in a poem included in a letter to his long-time secretary with whom he had a late secret affair, Betty Mackereth.⁴⁹⁸ The animus against literary understrappers of Balokowsky's calibre is exchanged for a certain weary knowingness. This is an excerpt from Balokowsky's biography of the poet, perfectly mimicking scholarly writing: “The substance of this section”, “fractured by affection”, “our subject”, “(see page thirty”).

⁴⁹⁶ Burnett 2012, p. 318

⁴⁹⁷ *RW*, p. 90

⁴⁹⁸ Compare: Burnett 2012, p. 650; Mackereth revealed the existence of the poem as late as 2010

Relating the poet's love relationships, Balokowsky comes to the conclusion that the poet's lover "must have been thankful when it ceased." This is Larkin at his most intimate, relating his simultaneous entanglement with three women in an apologetic love poem to Betty Mackereth. Appropriately, Larkin makes use of the sonnet form here, but entangles Elizabethan and Petrarchan sonnet. The rhyme scheme of the octet is abab cdcd, while the rhyme scheme of the remaining sestet is the Petrarchan efg efg. The combination of both types of sonnet is perhaps an indicator of the somewhat unorthodox situation Larkin and Mackereth found themselves in: the complicated nature of the relationship does not allow for a straightforward love sonnet.

The poet himself then addresses his biographer directly: "Dear Jake", to expose that he knows full well how to read between the lines: "I know you really mean 'Hey Mac,/This old goat was so crazy for a fuck he - '", while also aware of the restrictions of the scholarly trade: "No doubt the UP wouldn't print that page." The speaker here once more mimics Balokowsky's broad American slang. Interestingly, Larkin exposes exactly what he criticizes about lecturers with all expenses paid: he "translates" scholarly language into plain words.

However, this is not what the poem is about. While the first part of the poem is addressed to Balokowsky, the speaker turns away from his biographer in the last three lines of the sestet. There is no second direct address which enhances the impression that the speaker does not dare to look up. The conversational caesura "Well," at the beginning of the final three lines underlines this effect. The speaker agrees with Balokowsky "Well, it was singular" only to qualify this agreement: "but, looking back,/Only what men do get, if they are lucky". Characteristically, the final line throws a completely different light on the entire poem: "And when it came there was no thought of age." "It" simultaneously denotes the complicated entanglement of love

relationships and singles out this one relationship as if the speaker was suddenly looking up into the eyes of his addressee. The line is particularly interesting in the Larkin context. Larkin's poetry is perpetually concerned with the coming of old age and death; this love declaration to Betty Mackereth is all the more touching in this context.⁴⁹⁹ "Dear Jake" is intensely personal. Nonetheless, it shows off the meticulous craftsman Larkin who effortlessly picks up a narrative begun several years before.

It seems as if in 1976, Larkin drops the charges against travelling scholars who more often than not seem to end up in California. It is perhaps the final realization that he will never be one of them; Larkin is able to shake off the jealousy that was buried deep below his superficial sarcasm. "Posterity" is self-deprecatory while simultaneously lashing out at scholarly Americanisms. "Dear Jake", on the other hand, is a love poem.

The complexities of the later Larkin's attitudes towards the "circuit" and American experiments in poetry are sharply focused in his ambiguous but oddly intimate relationship with his American contemporary, Robert Lowell, the leading confessional poet of the time, who eventually became a personal acquaintance of Larkin's when he read in the department of American Studies at the University of Hull in 1973. Lowell, "the best American poet of his generation"⁵⁰⁰, had been admiring Larkin's poetry since *The Less Deceived*, stating upon its publication in America in 1960 "No post-war poetry has so caught the moment".⁵⁰¹ Lowell grouped Larkin's among the work of his favourite writers Bishop, Plath "and much of Roethke"⁵⁰² – all of them American.

Motion describes how in Hull Larkin dutifully "drank with Lowell, listened to him

⁴⁹⁹ The particular sentiment of this line in "Dear Jake" is mirrored in yet another little poem Larkin wrote to Mackereth on a Valentine's Day card: "And the clocks, when we're together,/Count no shadows. Only sun." quoted in: Burnett 2012, p. 316

⁵⁰⁰ Quoted from: TIME Magazine, June 2, 1967 accessed online 21/07/2012
<http://us.macmillan.com/selectedpoemsexpandededition/RobertLowell>

⁵⁰¹ Motion 1993, p. 328

⁵⁰² Quoted in: Motion 1993, p. 429

read, then drank some more”⁵⁰³, but while Lowell remained a fan, Larkin could not, ultimately, reciprocate. A few years before their actual meeting in person, Larkin had written to Amis about “R.L. who’s never looked like being a single iota of good in all his born days”⁵⁰⁴, ridiculed Lowell as the “Yank version of John Heath-Stubbs”⁵⁰⁵ and rhymed “Lowell, Lowell, Lowell/Corn is the thing he does so well”⁵⁰⁶ in a 1966 letter to Robert Conquest. Officially, this scorn is translated as Lowell’s poems being “curious, hurried, offhand vignettes, seeming too personal to be practised, yet nonetheless accurate and original.”⁵⁰⁷ When Larkin sent Lowell his latest volume *High Windows* in 1974 he inscribed it “From a Drought to a Deluge”⁵⁰⁸ perhaps uncovering one of the reasons for his private scorn: while Larkin struggled to write at all, Lowell was one of the most prolific American writers of the time.

What strikes Larkin as “too personal” in Lowell’s work is a chief characteristic of the American 1960s “confessional poetry”⁵⁰⁹ in which “the private life of the poet himself [...] becomes a major theme.”⁵¹⁰ Within confessional poetry “the *persona* adopts the attitude of a patient on the analyst’s couch, revealing, often in images of violence and fantasy, a sick alienation.”⁵¹¹ James Booth suggests that Larkin’s “Talking in Bed” is “as painfully revealing as any poem by Lowell”⁵¹², but the intrinsic quality of Larkin’s “confession” is fundamentally different from Lowell. What is merely intimate and private in the English poet becomes almost uncomfortably autobiographic in the

⁵⁰³ Ibid., p. 430

⁵⁰⁴ *SL*, p. 382

⁵⁰⁵ Motion 1993, 344

⁵⁰⁶ *SL*, p. 382

⁵⁰⁷ Motion 1993, p. 430

⁵⁰⁸ Quoted in: Terry Kelly, “The Million-Petalled Flower of Being Here”, Feb 13, 2012, blog accessed online 30/04/2012 <http://fridaynightboys300.blogspot.de/2012/02/philip-larkin-complete-poems-review.html>

⁵⁰⁹ Termed by M.L. Rosenthal in whose definition the “helpful and too limited” nature of the term is already inherent, Rosenthal 1973, p. 25

⁵¹⁰ Ibid., p. 15

⁵¹¹ A.R. Jones, “Necessity and Freedom: The Poetry of Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton”, in: *Critical Quarterly*, Vol. 7, March 1965, p. 14

⁵¹² Booth 2005, p. 32

American's poetry. There is a single personal pronoun in the four short stanzas of Larkin's "Talking in Bed" – "us" – while Lowell's longer "Memories of West Street and Lepke"⁵¹³ uses the first person singular pronoun "I" eleven times in four stanzas; "the single consciousness of the poet is everything."⁵¹⁴ Lowell's experience always remains extraordinary and thus, exclusive. Only the minority of readers will share the experience of an American prison and the sight of a "Flabby, bald, lobotomized" Mafia boss "piling towels on a rack."⁵¹⁵ Lowell clearly sketches time and place – "These are the tranquillized *Fifties*"; "I walked on the roof of the West Street Jail [...] and saw the Hudson River once a day"; Larkin is concerned neither with geographical nor political perspectives. Lowell's "Waking In The Blue" from *Life Studies* sketches the odd male community at a mental asylum. The lines "Azure day/makes my agonized blue window bleaker" and the sudden exclamation "Absence!" might flicker with a certain Larkinesque familiarity, but Lowell's duty is always to "the flow of raw experience"⁵¹⁶ while Larkin "is always writing about the human life shared by *everyone*."⁵¹⁷ [emphasis mine] The sensationalized public display of private, autobiographical matters in confessional poetry is not for Larkin: "I don't really equate poems with real-life as most people do."⁵¹⁸

It is intriguing to contrast Larkin's response to Lowell with that to Plath, an altogether more rhetorically incisive, unstable and craftsmanlike poet. A disciple of Lowell, the American Plath belongs to the school of confessional poetry, despite the fact that her 'confession' is markedly different from that of her mentor. Sending his review for the *Poetry Review* to Andrew Motion, Larkin compares Plath's poetry to the

⁵¹³ Robert Lowell, *Life Studies*, Faber and Faber Ltd., London, 1959, p. 99

⁵¹⁴ Roger Sharrock, "Private Faces in Public Places: The Poetry of Larkin and Lowell", in: *English* (1987) 36 (155), p. 128

⁵¹⁵ Robert Lowell, *Life Studies*, Faber and Faber, 1959, p. 100

⁵¹⁶ Sharrock 1987, p. 124

⁵¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 131

⁵¹⁸ *LM*, p. 325

splatter-and-gore films published by Hammer Films at the time and comes to the conclusion: "I [...] don't suppose I shall open her book again." Nonetheless, in the same letter, Larkin notes Plath's "profusion of disturbing imagery [...] that is both gripping and incomprehensible."⁵¹⁹ The review itself discerns Plath's poetry as "intellectually conceited, vivid and resourceful in image and vocabulary"⁵²⁰; her last poems as "to the highest degree original and scarcely less effective".⁵²¹

If the confessional nature of Plath's poetry draws the reader into a world that is "phantasmagoric, intensely personal and painfully private"⁵²², Larkin characterizes Plath's themes as "neurosis, insanity, disease, death, horror, terror"⁵²³ but is reluctant to reduce Plath's talent to a merely psychological condition: "Mad poets do not write about madness."⁵²⁴ On a literary level, these themes are not too far removed from Larkin's own. There is a certain appraisal in Larkin's comment: "Of course she could write."⁵²⁵ Writing to Motion, Larkin somewhat regrets not knowing enough about Plath's biography. Strikingly, Linda Wagner-Martin's biography of Plath from 1988 recalls the following: "Even when she was tired [from hunting for flats in London], Sylvia was good company, excited about Philip Larkin's poems in *The Less Deceived*, enthusiastic about teaching Helga [her host at the time] to make [...] fish chowder."⁵²⁶ Plath knew Larkin's work.

Plath's first volume of poems *The Colossus and Other Poems* was first published by Heineman in the UK in 1960. Writing to Conquest in 1961 Larkin gleefully recalls how V.S. Scannell writes about "that cow looking as if it was planning to write a long poem

⁵¹⁹ *SL*, p. 660

⁵²⁰ *RW*, p. 278

⁵²¹ *RW*, p. 281

⁵²² Jones 1965, p. 14

⁵²³ *RW*, p. 279

⁵²⁴ *RW*, p. 281

⁵²⁵ *SL*, p. 662

⁵²⁶ Linda Wagner-Martin, *Sylvia Plath A Biography*, Chatto&Windus, London, 1988, p. 169

about Ted Hughes. Sylvia, perhaps.”⁵²⁷ Perhaps owing to his dislike of Plath’s husband at the time and fellow (and rival) poet Ted Hughes – the “primitive forthright virile leather-jacketed *persona*”⁵²⁸ – Larkin was familiar with Plath. Apart from the rivalry with Hughes Motion notes that Plath “was at that time beginning to achieve recognition as a poet”⁵²⁹ in her own right, especially in the UK. Reviews of *The Colossus and Other Poems* were favourable; Peter Dickinson in *Punch* explicitly noted Plath’s Americanness but at the same time came to the conclusion that she was “different.”⁵³⁰

In his review of Plath’s *Collected Poems*, Larkin remarks how 1959 seems to have been the year in which Plath finally found her poetic voice, the “individual note”⁵³¹ of the skilled poet. In 1959, Plath writes “A Winter Ship”⁵³² – included in *The Colossus and Other Poems* - describing a wharf and connecting musings on melting ice with an idea of human transience. The images and enumerations she uses are strangely reminiscent of Larkin’s “Here”, written two years later than Plath’s poem, in 1961. In Plath, the pier is “that rickety edifice/Of warehouses, derricks, smokestacks and bridges/In the distance”; the speaker in Larkin’s poem perceives a cluster of “domes and statues, spires and cranes” that has already been traced back to Wordsworth’s “Composed Upon Westminster Bridge” but is perhaps just as close to Plath. If we assume that strong impressions of Wordsworth and Plath mingle in these images it does not come as a surprise that “domes and cranes”, “wharfs and wires, ricks and refineries” surface again in Larkin’s “Bridge for the Living” from 1981.

Plath’s “A Winter Ship” sketches “Red and orange barges” that “list and blister”; in “Here” there is “barge-crowded water”. Larkin’s absent speaker experiences the town as

⁵²⁷ *SL*, p. 332

⁵²⁸ *SL*, p. 525

⁵²⁹ *SL*, p. 332

⁵³⁰ Linda W. Wagner (ed.), *Sylvia Plath The Critical Heritage*, Routledge, London, 1988, p. 2

⁵³¹ *RW*, p. 279

⁵³² Sylvia Plath, *The Collected Poems*, Ted Hughes (ed.), Harper&Row, New York, 1981, p. 112/3

a “fishy-smelling/Pastoral of ships”, while the water in Plath is “Ferrying the smells of dead cod and tar.” “Here” homes in on the individual speaker in the same way as mere description gives way to a non-defined “we” in the second but last stanza of Plath’s poem; the first person plural pronoun is one of the few pronouns in the entire poem. Larkin’s “Here” dispenses with personal pronouns altogether. In “A Winter Ship” “We wanted to see the sun come up”; in “Here”, the speaker is “Facing the sun”. The fundamental difference between Plath’s and Larkin’s poems is the time of the year. The summer in “Here” is sketched by the “poppies’ bluish neutral distance”; in Plath “Even our shadows are blue with cold.” While Larkin’s speaker is almost in reach of blissful “unfenced existence”, Plath’s poem closes with an unspoken, undefined threat: “Each wave-tip glitters like a knife.” This is not Lowell’s confessional exhibitionism, this is something more contained and yet more powerful. Plath as a confessional poet enters “the world of Kafka”⁵³³ in which under the surface of the normality of everyday life lies a haunting menace that threatens at any time to turn over reality into something out of our power, out of our grasp. This is the horror and the terror Larkin detects in his review of Plath. While Larkin finds solace in a regular rhyme scheme, Plath dispenses with rhymes altogether. What “stands plain as a wardrobe” in Larkin, is a somewhat less defined, amorphous terror in Plath; the poets are united by fear of death; the fear of the ultimate loss of control. Larkin himself states in an interview from 1967: “The influence of another poet is not primarily on the choice of words but on the choice of subject.”⁵³⁴

Plath’s “Suicide off Egg Rock”⁵³⁵, also from 1959 and included in *The Colossus and other Poems*, is one of the poems that strike Larkin as evidence that Plath “had found her subject matter.”⁵³⁶ Casually sketching life on the seafront and as if only by chance

⁵³³ Jones 1965, p. 14

⁵³⁴ *FR*, p. 31

⁵³⁵ Plath 1981, p. 115

⁵³⁶ *RW*, p. 279

encountering a “dead skate”, Plath weaves in the suicide of an undefined “he” into the poem: “The words in his book wormed off the pages” until “Everything glittered like blank paper”. The curious temporal perspective catches the reader by surprise: Plath’s speaker lulls the reader until he can hardly believe what he is reading. “Sun struck the water like a damnation./No pit of shadow to crawl into.” perhaps hints at the desperate situation, but the minute observation of squealing children and “A mongrel working his legs to a gallop” create a security that will only gradually expose the poem’s horror. The harmonious beach scene in the first stanza almost imperceptibly makes way for the second stanza in which “His body beached with the sea’s garbage” – just like one of the beach goers not paying attention, the reader would almost miss the harsh reality of a suicidal act if the poem’s title had not given it away. In the face of a dead body, the reader’s attention is furthermore diverted by the “dead skate”, just another piece in the “sea’s garbage”. The stanzas in “Suicide off Egg Rock” grow gradually shorter, until there is only a single line left. Curiously, the third stanza reverts back to the moment of the suicide warping time perceptions: “He heard when he walked into the water/The forgetful surf creaming on those ledges.” The adjective “forgetful” becomes central for the poem; the suicide of a man walking into the water to kill himself in the fashion of Virginia Woolf is noted casually; the reader’s attention is promptly diverted. What strikes Larkin here is perhaps the unagitated manner of the poem that is not in the least sensationally ‘insane’ or confessional in the personal sense but treats death with casual indifference. Larkin’s speakers cannot muster this indifference.

Strikingly, the beginning of Plath’s 1959 poem is reminiscent of the beginning of Larkin’s “To The Sea” written in 1969. Indeed, the situation in “To The Sea” is almost complemented by details from Plath’s poem. In “To The Sea” the speaker steps “over the low wall that divides/Road from concrete walk above the shore”, while behind the

“he” on the beach in “Suicide off Egg Rock” “the hotdogs split and drizzled/On the public grills”. In Plath the water “Rippled and pulsed in the glassy updraught”; in Larkin there is “The small hushed waves’ repeated fresh collapse” that is mirrored in another one of Plath’s 1959 poems. In “Point Shirley”⁵³⁷, “The shingle booms, bickering under/The sea’s collapse”. In Plath’s “Suicide off Egg Rock” children

Were squealing where combers broke and the spindrift
Raveled wind-ripped from the crest of the wave.
A mongrel working his legs to a gallop
Hustled a gull flock to flap off the sandspit.

These are instances of the “miniature gaiety of seashores” Larkin sketches in “To The Sea”. In his poem, there are not squealing children, but “uncertain children” and “The distant bather’s weak protesting trebles”. Larkin’s beach-goers “lie, eat, sleep in hearing of the surf”; in Plath there is “The forgetful surf”. In “Suicide off Egg Rock”, Plath begins two lines with the anaphoric “Everything”: “Everything glittered like blank paper./Everything shrank in the sun’s corrosive/Ray”. Larkin uses the same construction once in “To The Sea”. “Everything crowds under the low horizon.” Despite these similarities in wording and construction, the subject matter of the poems is decidedly different: Larkin’s speaker finds a mildly reassuring continuity in the ancient rituals of beach life; Plath hides the disturbing truth of a suicide under the apparent casualness of a beach scene.

It is again the terror that lurks underneath the surface of Plath’s poem like the sea that “pulses under a skin of oil” in Plath’s “A Winter Ship”. I am not suggesting that Larkin was directly influenced by Plath, but the similarities as demonstrated in the brief comparison between Plath’s “Suicide off Egg Rock” and Larkin’s “To The Sea” make it likely that Larkin at least read parts of *The Colossus and Other Poems* when it was published in the UK. A. Alvarez reviewed Plath’s volume for the *Observer* in 1960;

⁵³⁷ Plath 1981, p. 110/1

Roy Fuller added his views in *London Magazine* in 1961; A.E. Dyson reviewed *The Colossus and Other Poems* for *Critical Quarterly* in the summer of 1961 (his review explicitly mentions “Shirley Point”); in August 1961 there was an unsigned review in the *Times Literary Supplement* concluding that Plath was “a talent”.⁵³⁸

Reviewing Linda W. Wagner’s book *Sylvia Plath The Critical Heritage* in the *Spectator* in 1967 M.L. Rosenthal detects a “doleful, Larkin-like sense of loss”⁵³⁹ at the end of Plath’s “The Eye-Mote” from 1959. Rosenthal’s observation once more suggests a similar sensibility between the Plath of the late 1950s and Larkin’s work. Plath’s “Old Ladies’ Home”⁵⁴⁰ from 1959, though not included in *The Colossus*, reminds the reader of typical Larkinesque tropes. Age and death are certainly two of Larkin’s poetic preoccupations. The “beds boxed-in like coffins” in Plath’s poem are close in concept and expression to Mr Bleaney’s “one hired box”.

Though written much later, Larkin’s “Heads in the Women’s Ward” shares some fundamentals with Plath’s poem. Larkin sketches the passing of time for the women in the ward: “Sixty years ago they smiled/At lover, husband, first-born child.” There is much of the same in Plath: “Sons, daughters, daughters and sons/Distant and cold as photos,/Grandchildren nobody knows.” Curiously, however, if Plath is the “horror poet” according to Larkin, the horror of age and sickness is made almost grotesquely clear in Larkin: the women have “wild white hair and staring eyes”,

Jaws stand open; necks are stretched
With every tendon sharply sketched;
A bearded mouth talks silently.

The question of age and outer appearance is treated very differently in Plath who finds a more dignified metaphor: “Age wears the best black fabric/Rust-red or green as

⁵³⁸ Quoted in: Wagner-Martin 1988b, p. 41

⁵³⁹ Quoted in: *Ibid.*, p. 94

⁵⁴⁰ Plath 1981, p. 120

lichens". While Larkin's speaker closes the poem mouthing his horror in the face of death explicitly - "For old age come/Death's terror and delirium", Plath's death is still personified in the old-fashioned way and thus, less threatening:

And Death, that bald-head buzzard,
Stalks in halls where the lamp wick
Shortens with each breath drawn.

In comparison with Plath's early poetry, Larkin is closer to the mark of the "horror poet" in his speakers' compulsion to name the terrors explicitly and unsparingly. Compared to this, Plath appears as almost gentle, while her horrors are always, as someone put it, just in the corner of her eye if she is not looking. Larkin's speakers tend to face their terror head on as if naming had the power to alleviate the dread. The confessional nature of Plath's poetry, the "neurosis, insanity, disease"⁵⁴¹ Larkin detects is most pronounced in the poems Plath wrote just before her suicide, but then again the idea of "My mind a rock,/No fingers to grip, no tongue" in the late poem "Paralytic"⁵⁴² is not too far removed from "no sight, no sound,/No touch or taste or smell" in Larkin's late poem "Aubade".

In 1963, Larkin writes to Monica Jones:

Heard little of interest, except [...] that S. Plath gassed herself. She had had a mental breakdown once before, & is supposed to have feared another, while, as far as I can see, making certain of it. Ted had cleared off, not enjoying the symptoms.⁵⁴³

With what we have seen in the previous paragraphs one can almost hear him add "poor Sylvia." Interestingly, these sentiments are confined to the more intimate letters to Monica Jones and find no room in the banter with Larkin's other correspondents.

Larkin's engagement with American literature is thus more far-reaching than he cares to admit. Quizzed about his presumed ignorance of foreign literature, Larkin tellingly

⁵⁴¹ *RW*, p. 279

⁵⁴² Plath 1981, p. 266/7

⁵⁴³ *LM*, p. 317

replies with an anecdote about Sidney Bechet: “You remember that wonderful remark of Sidney Bechet when the recording engineer asked if he’d like to hear a playback: ‘That don’t do me no good.’ That’s what I think about foreign literature.”⁵⁴⁴ It is this characteristically *faux-gruff* assertion that once more underlines Larkin’s engagement with America. Jazz opened up an image of America, a personal dream of America very early on in his life, which eventually finds its way into Larkin’s poetry. But Larkin’s utopian idea of America, intimately connected with jazz and blues, clashes with his harsh critique of American literary models and the lecture business: “This American idea – it is American, isn’t it? Started with Pound and Eliot? – that somehow every new poem has to be the sum of all old poems [...], well, it’s the sort of idea lecturers get, if you’ll excuse my saying so. [...] it’s not how poetry works.”⁵⁴⁵

However, Larkin is far from rejecting modernism wholesale. Larkin goes as far as to adapt Eliot, the “foxtrotting American.” However, he does this in a quietly subtle way as if to prove the despised heroes of modernism screaming “look everyone, I’m doing things differently!” wrong. Larkin’s engagement with American literature does not stop with Pound’s and Eliot’s modernism. In 1962 A. Alvarez notes how “the experimental techniques of Eliot and the rest never really took on in England because they were an essentially American concern: attempts to forge a distinctively American language for poetry”⁵⁴⁶ while Philip Hobsbaum suggests in 1965 that “both Eliot and Pound have been read with too English an accent” and should be seen as the forerunners to the poets of the Beat Generation in their attempt “to write a genuine popular poetry”⁵⁴⁷ for America. Perhaps this is why Larkin in “The Dance” feels the need to “English” Eliot’s

⁵⁴⁴ *FR*, p. 54

⁵⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 54

⁵⁴⁶ Quoted in: Anthony Easthope, “Reading the Poetry of Sylvia Plath” in: *English* (1994) 43 (177), p. 228

⁵⁴⁷ Philip Hobsbaum, “The Growth of English Modernism” in: *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 6, No. 1, Winter/Spring 1965, p. 98

“Prufrock” and be done with it in 1964. Larkin’s diatribe against “the mad lads” of modernism has been the centre of attention for so long that it obscures a more profound engagement not only with America but with American literature – until well after 1922.

Chapter 7

'Quite at a loss with the Oxfordshire dialect': Larkin and Germany

If America is Larkin's most intimate imaginative Other because of his enthusiasm for American jazz, then his most intimate Other on a real, experienced basis is Germany. Larkin went abroad on very few occasions, and Germany was the country he visited most frequently. Apart from a school trip to Brussels and his trip to Paris with Bruce Montgomery in 1952, Larkin was twice taken to Germany for his summer holidays by his father in 1936 and 1937. Larkin's father Sydney was a glowing admirer of German efficiency during the Nazi regime and exchanged letters with Hitler's Minister of Economics. Young Philip on the other hand was not as happy with Germany as his father. He later claimed that the childhood visits to Germany did much to establish his antipathy against "abroad" – mostly to do with the language barrier: "I found it petrifying [...] not being able to speak to anyone or read anything."⁵⁴⁸ His problem is summed up by the oft-cited anecdote in which young Philip is asked something by a bus driver in German, replies "No" and is then duly ignored until he finds out later that what he thought had been the question "Have you been to Germany before?" was in fact "Do you like Germany?" Philip was 14. Larkin only started learning German at school in 1938 – Austria had just been added to the *Reich* by Hitler and the Sudetenland was annexed soon afterwards – but remembers how Sydney liked the German beer cellars and the music of the "Schiffer Klavier". Strikingly, Larkin still recalls this German term for an accordion as late as 1981. The sound of the traditional instrument clashed

⁵⁴⁸ Motion 1993, p. 26

painfully with the tastes of young Philip as “someone who was just buying their first Count Basie records.”⁵⁴⁹ He only returned to Germany once, in 1976, to pick up the Shakespeare Prize in Hamburg, taking Monica Jones with him. On this occasion, however, he left to return to England as soon as his speech was finished. These three visits to Germany, more than to any other country, make Germany the most actively experienced foreign country in his imaginative world.

Proof-reading his *Festschrift, Larkin at Sixty*, Larkin suggests to Anthony Thwaite to correct Noel Hughes’s view about his father: “I do think it would be better to say ‘He was an admirer of contemporary Germany, not excluding its politics.’ In fact he was a lover of Germany, really batty about the place. I hated it.”⁵⁵⁰ Sydney was politely asked to remove the Nazi regalia from his Treasurer’s office in Coventry in 1939; the son repeatedly records the appearance of Nazis in his 1942 dream diary, but by the time World War II started, Larkin Junior “felt unwilling or unable to compete with Sydney’s opinions”.⁵⁵¹ Despite this, Larkin nonetheless seems to mirror his father’s attitudes towards Nazi Germany. Writing to Sutton in December 1940, he is convinced that “Germany will win this war like a dose of salts” only to conclude: “Balls to the war. Balls to a good many things, events, people, and institutions.”⁵⁵² What may be classed as an engagement with the war is immediately qualified. Larkin does not focus on the war itself, but merely enumerates it within a general group of personal dislikes. “Except as something likely to cause him a good deal of personal inconvenience, the war might not have existed.”⁵⁵³ While his friends were all drafted into the army, he was rejected because of his poor eyesight and paid little attention to the war. However, echoes of Sydney’s attitude towards Germany prevail up until 1942: “If there is any new life in

⁵⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁰ *SL*, p. 622

⁵⁵¹ Motion 1993, p. 32

⁵⁵² *SL*, p.7

⁵⁵³ Motion 1993, p. 33

the world today, it is in Germany. True, it's a vicious and blood-brutal kind of affair [...] Germany has revolted back too far [...] But I think they have many valuable new habits."⁵⁵⁴ At the beginning of 1943, Larkin takes a stand: "I dislike Germans and I dislike Nazis, at least what I heard of them." However, he voices his opinions without taking action: "I can't believe that anything I can do as an Englishman would be of the slightest use, nor do I see any 'hope' in the future."⁵⁵⁵ For Larkin, the war seems to have an abstract quality, something he cannot quite grasp on any other than a purely personal level. The Germans might be "fools and bastards"⁵⁵⁶, but the essential quality of the war is that it "is getting everyone down. [...] life is scrappy and ragged, and it will be long before full life is restored."⁵⁵⁷ Writing to Sutton in 1946, Larkin admits freely "I don't know anything at all about anything, and it's no use pretending I do."⁵⁵⁸

Instead of hungrily scanning the papers for news from the front, Larkin confides to Sutton in February 1945 that "There's a lot in the paper today about what Russia, America, Russia, England, Russia, America and Russia are going to do with Germany. I haven't bothered to read it."⁵⁵⁹ Larkin here betrays a certain ennui with the war news and asserts his personal cure against the boredom of war: writing. He finished his first novel *Jill* in 1944, and was already at work on what was to become *A Girl in Winter* in early 1945. The almost defiant "I haven't bothered" in regard to the involvement of Russia and the USA in the war is countered by the words Larkin finds about his writing process: "I am solely concerned with the paradox of producing a fresh, spontaneous-seeming narrative out of painful rewrites and corrections."⁵⁶⁰ Sutton's news of the German surrender in Italy in April 1945 is greeted with news of the novel's progress:

⁵⁵⁴ *SL*, p. 36

⁵⁵⁵ *SL*, p. 53

⁵⁵⁶ *SL*, p. 94

⁵⁵⁷ *SL*, p. 94

⁵⁵⁸ *SL*, p. 115

⁵⁵⁹ *SL*, p. 98

⁵⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

“‘The Kingdom of Winter’, draft I, finished last Saturday: since then I have done 12 pages of Draft II.”⁵⁶¹ From the first post-war year 1946 comes the realization that “the only quality that makes art durable & famous is the quality of generating delight in the state of living.”⁵⁶²

Both Larkin’s novels, *Jill* and *A Girl in Winter*, were written during World War II. Yet both are far removed from being war novels. In *Jill*, the “war-time newspaper sheets”⁵⁶³ are used to light the fire in John Kemp’s university lodgings while the papers show “the gaunt windows of churches, the rescue parties among the debris, the little children clutching hot mugs of tea”. In *Jill*, protagonist John Kemp’s native Huddlesford is blitzed and he gets leave to go and check on his parents. Leaving the warm cocoon of the Oxford college (his ideal of hibernating alone in his room has never materialized) John “seemed to be leaving a region of unreality and insubstantial pain for the real world where he could really be hurt.” Worrying about his parents he harbours his guilty conscience, full of regrets about being too self-centred: “he had pushed them [his parents] to the back of his mind, had sometimes felt ashamed of them, had not bothered to write to them regularly.” Under the influence of the love-hate-relationship with his roommate Christopher John has managed to push aside the world beyond the college walls.

Returning into the “real world”, John Kemp discovers a wrecked city in the aftermath of a blitz. However, the destruction of the city is evoked in images of beauty which underline John’s inability to register what really happened. John encounters “a bombed house, nearly the first he had ever seen. He looked at the broken bricks, lurching floors and laths sticking out like delicate broken bones.”⁵⁶⁴ and “skeletons of

⁵⁶¹ *SL*, p. 100

⁵⁶² *SL*, p. 115

⁵⁶³ *Jill*, p. 87

⁵⁶⁴ *Jill*, p. 193-195

roofs, blank walls and piles of masonry [...] undulated like a frozen sea”⁵⁶⁵ while “A thin stalk of smoke still trickled slowly up into the air”⁵⁶⁶ almost like a parody of the pastoral hearth. While the sun - “a wrathful disc”⁵⁶⁷ that “stared apocalyptically down [...] like one hostile eye”⁵⁶⁸ with “a monitory, baleful look”⁵⁶⁹ - throws an alienating light on the scenes of destruction during the day, the moon at night “by day a pith-coloured segment, hung brilliantly in the sky”.⁵⁷⁰ Somehow, the brilliant light of the moon is more merciful than the glaring sunlight.

John’s worry about his parents makes him replay the role of the helpless child, praying fervently for his parents’ well-being, while the discovery of his unharmed home in an altogether unharmed street momentarily returns John to his childhood: “It was as if he had just come home from school and was having to go up the entry road to the backdoor because his mother was out shopping.”⁵⁷¹ Between the “great tearing blows that left iron twisted into semi-interrogative shapes” his house is still standing, his parents are safe at an uncle’s. Looking through the windows in the pose of the intruding stranger, everything is “tidy as usual, there were ornaments on the table and the clocks showed the right time”.⁵⁷² This experience directly mirrors Larkin’s autobiographical search for his parents after the Blitz in his hometown Coventry. The Larkins’ house was unharmed; his parents safely at an uncle’s in Lichfield. Much like Larkin, John Kemp returns to Oxford relieved to carry on writing letters to an imaginary sister, primarily concerned with covering up his own insecurity in the presence of his aggressively self-assured room mate and real girls.

⁵⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶⁶ *Jill*, p. 196

⁵⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶⁸ *Jill*, p. 197

⁵⁶⁹ *Jill*, p. 196

⁵⁷⁰ *Jill*, p. 198

⁵⁷¹ *Jill*, p. 197

⁵⁷² *Jill*, p. 198

Larkin re-employs the notion of John-as-child when he is looking into his parents' living-room: "It was strange, like looking into a doll's house, and putting his hands against the window frames he felt as protective as a child feels towards a doll's house and its tiny rooms."⁵⁷³ The image is highly ironic: the insecure weakling John Kemp is hardly able to protect anything larger than a doll's house.

Once John is more or less convinced of his parents' well-being, the city's "destruction became fascinating." The newly discovered brightness of the moon - "It had never seemed so bright." - appears as a symbol of a new age: "The wreckage looked like ruins of an age over and done with."⁵⁷⁴ This corresponds to the assertion of Fred, an old schoolmate John encounters in the wreckage. He almost gleefully warns John to avoid the city centre: "They're dynamitin' - what's left of it."⁵⁷⁵

Eating in a blacked-out pub sparsely lighted by candles before his train departs back to Oxford, John is nonetheless confronted by personal fates: the landlady is waiting to hear from her husband, pragmatically grateful that only his leg was affected and putting up a brave front in the face of the tragedy. A man who was staying at a hotel with his wife relates the story of how he told his wife to pack their things while he went to get the car. While he was arguing with a policeman whether it was safe to drive, the hotel is hit by a bomb. There is hardly any compassion left. Everyone present "seemed to recognize the young man's need to speak without being over-much interested in what he was saying". There is no community of suffering. The young man "half-hysterically" predicts "There won't be a town left standing" "as if he desired this more than anything".

John leaves to catch his train, and falls asleep. He does not even waste a thought on

⁵⁷³ *Jill*, p. 198

⁵⁷⁴ *Jill*, p. 198

⁵⁷⁵ *Jill*, p. 195

the scalded, red necks of the soldiers he sees at the station. His response to the realities of war is oddly callous and egocentrically personal: the destruction of his hometown “represented the end of his use for the place. It meant no more to him now, and so it was destroyed: it seemed symbolic, a kind of annulling of his childhood. The thought excited him.” Here, Larkin practises a trope that surfaces time and time again in his poetry. What is most prominently spelt out in “If, My Darling” in 1950 – “the past is past and the future neuter” – is decidedly less fatalistic in John Kemp’s case than in Larkin’s mature poetry: “all the past is cancelled: all the suffering connected with that town, all your childhood, is wiped out. Now there is a fresh start for you: you are no longer governed by what has gone before.”

John Kemp discards the doll’s house of his childhood, coming to the somewhat diffuse resolution “he’d show them”; “now they’d be seeing something”. John surprisingly takes strength from the blitz while his fellow students make light of it: “The blitz is like a good show [...]. After a long run in town, it’s touring the provinces”. The human tragedy of the war - “when I was doing special constable’s duty [...] we found a shelter full of corpses”⁵⁷⁶ - is interrupted by the account of a party during the blitz. The reality of the war is present but overlaid by the lightheartedness that goes hand in hand with trauma . Larkin once more homes in on the individual. *Jill*’s tragedy is not the war, but Kemp’s return to the doll’s house – weak, sick, beaten, and once more under his parents’ tutelage – at the end of the novel. The past is now. The brief moment of John’s resolution in the hope of a golden future is painfully shattered never to return in Larkin’s mature poetry. John Kemp takes temporary strength from his heightened awareness of the present. Katherine Lind, the heroine of Larkin’s follow-up to *Jill*, *A Girl in Winter*, is not allowed this luxury. She consciously blanks out a painful personal

⁵⁷⁶ *Jill*, pp. 200-205

past by stoically accepting a somewhat bleaker present and simultaneously acknowledging a vague future.

The war in *Jill* merely serves as an authenticating background to a failed coming of age story in which the intimidated and sick student has to be picked up by his parents at the end of the term. While the war is raging elsewhere, John Kemp dreams about the blissful non-place, the personal room “with a fire and the curtains drawn” at college. The image is the same as that in Larkin’s mature poetry. Much like Larkin’s personal response to the war it does not directly affect the novel’s protagonists in their quest either to become part of a community or to retreat to the “padlocked cube of light”.

Stephen Regan notes a “sedulous avoidance of any direct treatment of recent history”⁵⁷⁷ in Larkin’s later poetry. Larkin avoids history – and war as the greatest shifting of history – for a reason. In his 1963 review of *The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen*, “The War Poet”, Larkin categorizes war as the subject of poetry as “essentially irrelevant”: “the first-rank poet should ignore the squalid accident of war.”⁵⁷⁸ Writing about the war is not an act of free will as the poet merely “reacts against having a war thrust upon him”. He does not have the liberty to free himself from an impending historical event. “[A] poet’s choice of subject should seem an action, not a reaction.” If a poet reacts to war by making war his subject, his poetry is bound to be historically limited. In Larkin’s opinion, this is the one fault in Owen’s poetry. Larkin consciously avoids writing war poetry and war prose as this would seriously limit the scope of his narration. It is thus that *Jill* and *A Girl in Winter* merely employ the war as a more or less persuasive backdrop to anchor the narration in reality. The novels themselves are not about the war in the way that Owen’s poetry is about the harsh reality of war in the trenches.

⁵⁷⁷ Regan 2003, p. 217

⁵⁷⁸ *RW*, p. 159

Jill is only peripherally framed by the war. *A Girl in Winter* ventures one step further into the territory of the war novel by introducing a striking element into Larkin's usually male-dominated, English world: the novel's protagonist Katherine Lind is not only not male, but also not English. Some commentators indeed go so far as to insist that she is, to all intents and purposes, German, though Larkin is clearly determined to leave her nationality unstated. *A Girl in Winter* is thus far removed from the girly juvenile eroticism of Larkin's Brunette Coleman novels and the corresponding poems. *A Girl in Winter* underlines what Salem K. Hassan terms the "contemporaneity"⁵⁷⁹ of the women in Larkin's *oeuvre*. Women in Larkin "survive by virtue of their stoicism and unpretentious acceptance of their lot."⁵⁸⁰ Larkin's characters more often than not reject their past to live firmly in the present: "the past is past and the future's neuter." Katherine Lind's perspective, however, is much more than merely a presentation of female stoicism and contemporaneity. Larkin makes deliberate use of the female perspective in order to highlight what will become a main concern in his mature poetry: isolation and alienation. Female foreignness thus becomes the most readily available prototype of isolation to set against homely male Englishness giving Larkin the chance to explore the concept within a very obvious antithesis.

Larkin's very direct, very real experience of speechlessness and alienation in a foreign country, in Germany, looms large in the background of *A Girl in Winter*. Katherine's almost Kafkaesque journey alone – "so many miles and hours and different vehicles, [...] along so many platforms and quays, through ticket-barriers, entrance-halls, customs-houses and waiting-rooms" – perhaps directly mirrors the journeys young Philip undertook with Larkin Senior. Philip was taken to Germany. The novel, however, with the war and its circumstances relegated into the background, never

⁵⁷⁹ Salem K. Hassan, "Women in Philip Larkin", in: *English Studies*, Vol. 77, Issue 2 1996, p. 153

⁵⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 154

reveals where exactly Katherine Lind is from. Larkin refrains from doing so for a reason. It would have been easy for Larkin to construct a credible German background from his own experiences for his refugee heroine, but he deliberately keeps his heroine's circumstances in the dark in order to make a specific point. *A Girl in Winter* harbours a constant tension caused by Larkin's determination not to grant Katherine a specific nationality. In his preparatory notebook he wrote: "What city, what Katherine's original name and nationality was, etc all left unstated".⁵⁸¹

A Girl in Winter is divided into three parts. In the first, we witness Katherine Lind, a refugee from wartime Europe, engaged in her job at a library somewhere in bleak and wintry England still at war. Katherine is oppressed by her boss who insists on her foreignness. She is sent to accompany home a younger colleague, Miss Green, who has a toothache. The cold alienation of her situation is, however, made bearable by the fact that she is expecting a letter from a former English pen pal and object of her romantic fantasy, Robin Fennel. Taking her weak colleague to the dentist and eventually to her room to regain her strength, Katherine distractedly picks up Robin's expected letter "that had been thrust under the door".⁵⁸² Interestingly, Katherine occupies a typically Larkinesque place: her attic room is "on the top floor above the chemist's shop."⁵⁸³ Opening up to a stranger despite her usual reservations – "she was not a person to make friends carelessly"⁵⁸⁴ – we learn how Katherine, studying English at school, took part in a pen pal scheme, wrote letters to the English Robin and was eventually invited to spend the summer with the Fennels in an English village that is neither described in detail nor named. In the letter, Robin, now a soldier in the army, announces his arrival this very afternoon.

⁵⁸¹ (DPL/4/4, inside front cover opposite p.1.) – I am indebted to Prof. James Booth for this reference.

⁵⁸² *AGIW*, p. 50

⁵⁸³ *AGIW*, p. 49

⁵⁸⁴ *AGIW*, p. 67

The second part of the novel takes us back to Katherine's summer in England. At first mirroring Larkin's typical stance "I'm terrified of going abroad! And I'm afraid of the journey!", Katherine contemplates being "in a completely different country", before finally boarding a ship to Dover. The language barrier Larkin himself encountered in Germany hits Katherine as soon as she sets foot into England: "The porters and customs officials spoke a language as intelligible to her as Icelandic."⁵⁸⁵ Encountering a woman in the post office on one of her walks with Robin Fennel and his older sister Jane, Katherine is "quite at a loss with the Oxfordshire dialect, and could only say 'oh yes' and smile".⁵⁸⁶ However, spending the blue and golden (those are the adjectives most often employed) summer at the Fennel's house in England, Katherine finds it easier and easier "to understand English, and less difficult to speak it".⁵⁸⁷ The language barrier is slowly crumbling to pieces and despite Katherine's initial reservations, despite her constant inability to comprehend Robin's unaccommodating English politeness, Katherine feels that "time [in England] had a different quality from when she was at home. She could almost feel it passing slowly, luxuriously, like thick cream pouring from a silver jug".⁵⁸⁸

The teenage Katherine develops a romantic interest in Robin that is momentarily shaken when she learns that his older sister Jane has been monitoring the entire letter-writing process from the beginning in the hope of finding a friend. On her last evening in England, Robin takes Katherine punting and eventually kisses her "inexpertly with tight lips".⁵⁸⁹ The second part of the novel parts with Katherine who feels "dazed, as if she had been run over in the street" and the news from Jane who has just accepted the

⁵⁸⁵ AGIW, p. 73

⁵⁸⁶ AGIW, p. 133

⁵⁸⁷ AGIW, p. 113

⁵⁸⁸ AGIW, p. 101

⁵⁸⁹ AGIW, p. 173

family friend Jack Stormalong's proposal of marriage.⁵⁹⁰

The third part takes the reader back into the English winter of the first part of the novel. Recovering at Katherine's Miss Green suddenly realizes that she has the wrong handbag. She must have inadvertently swapped it at the chemist's. Luckily, there is a letter presumably addressed to the owner contained in the strange handbag. So Katherine puts Miss Green on a homebound bus and makes the journey across town to return the bag to its rightful owner and reclaim Miss Green's bag in the process. As the handwriting on the letter looks familiar to Katherine – it reminds her of the handwriting of Mr Anstey, her boss – she reads the letter to confirm her suspicions. Indeed, the letter is by Anstey, who has apparently proposed to the addressee of the letter and owner of the handbag, Miss Parbury, but has not yet received a reply. Shocked by the amount of personal revelation about her boss Katherine is even more shocked to meet Miss Parbury who is taking care of an elderly mother. Miss Parbury is “rather grotesque; her pale eyes bulged somewhat and her neck was too long”; her apartment is even more grotesque “overcrowded with gimcrack furniture, and the furniture overcrowded with trifling ornaments.”⁵⁹¹ The overcrowdedness of Miss Parbury's home along with the overwhelming presence of an unseen invalid mother who communicates by thumping a walking-stick on the floor is set directly against the orderliness, emptiness and isolation of Katherine's attic room. Katherine does not give herself away but deduces that it is the mother's presence that stands in the way of Anstey's and Miss Parbury's union.

Katherine returns late to the library after restoring Miss Green's handbag to its rightful owner and gaining an unexpected insight into Anstey's private life. Robin has sent a telegram to her at work, cancelling his visit and she resigns in the ensuing row with her boss. Katherine finally returns to her attic in the snowy dark only to encounter

⁵⁹⁰ *AGIW*, p. 174

⁵⁹¹ *AGIW*, p. 192-3

Robin at her doorstep. She takes him in, makes some dinner (here the war rationing becomes clear) and coffee, while Robin - on the verge of his embarkation - repeatedly tries to kiss her. Katherine "named a condition that he accepted"⁵⁹² and lets Robin spend the night. Deliberately, Larkin leaves open whether Katherine and Robin have sex and ends with more images of coldness and darkness that are constantly set against the blue and gold heat of the English summer in Katherine's memory. The England she remembers and the England she is now living in appear as two different countries linked by Robin who - despite their time together - remains a stranger. The image of the endless procession of icefloes "moving from darkness further into darkness" into a future without light at the very end the novel sounds the final note. Despite the bleakness, darkness and finality of the image, "the heart, the will, and all that made for protest, could at last sleep."⁵⁹³

The end is cold and bleak but somehow reconciliatory. It fatally and finally executes the decision that Larkin's speakers in his mature poetry so often quarrel with: to sever all relations with a human community and still sleep peacefully. The very beginning of the novel already hints at the conclusion: despite the masses of snow, "[l]ife had to be carried on".⁵⁹⁴ This is the stoicism that Hassan mentions. In his mature poetry, Larkin's speakers tend not to sleep very well: the speaker in "Sad Steps" cannot sleep for staring at the moon; the speaker in "Love Again" has trouble sleeping as he suffers violent pangs of jealousy while in "Aubade" he wakes in the middle of the night and lies awake until morning. Larkin's mature (male) speakers do not have Katherine's iron resolution to weather life coolly without being touched by anything. Initially Larkin considered naming the novel *Kingdom of Winter*. It is striking that Larkin should return to the cold,

⁵⁹² *AGIW*, p. 243

⁵⁹³ *AGIW*, p. 248

⁵⁹⁴ *AGIW*, p. 11

wintery images of the novel more than 30 years after its publication. His 1978 poem “The Winter Palace” laconically desires Katherine’s poise: a slow loss of human capacities of memory in old age “will be worth it, if in the end I manage/To blank out whatever it is that is doing the damage”. Katherine is the stronger personality as she determinedly blanks out her own past and the circumstances that brought her to England. She does not have to wait for old age to mercifully draw the curtains on life’s deficiencies. The last two lines are thus an echo of the cold, emotionless and yet somehow reassuring sleep at the end of *A Girl in Winter*: “Then there will be nothing I know./My mind will fold into itself, like fields, like snow.”

If existentialism is characterized by “the struggle to define meaning and identity in the face of alienation and isolation”⁵⁹⁵, Katherine faces the existential predicament. On an existentialist level, the ability to make rational decisions in a chaotic and irrational world defines the individual’s identity. If “man makes himself” in Sartre’s sense, it is striking to see that Katherine in *A Girl in Winter* with her rational decisions is so much further advanced in the process of “making identity” than Jane Fennel or even Robin: “life begins on the other side of despair”.⁵⁹⁶ It is perhaps no coincidence that Antoine Roquentin, the protagonist of Sartre’s novel *Nausea*, is desperately trying to construct meaning by revisiting the past. While the original French edition of the novel was published in 1938, the first English translation was published as late as 1964. Sartre and *La Nausée* are not mentioned among the books by French authors belonging to Larkin that Graham Chesters enumerates.⁵⁹⁷ The three French editions in Larkin’s personal library were inherited from his father and – characteristically playing down his knowledge of foreign languages – Larkin ridicules his own “plume-de-ma-tante

⁵⁹⁵ http://classiclit.about.com/od/existentialism/Existentialism_Literary_Theory.htm accessed online 29/06/2012

⁵⁹⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, Hayden Carruth (ed.), New Directions, New York, 1964, p. ix

⁵⁹⁷ Chesters 2006, p. 15

French”⁵⁹⁸ quoting Llewelyn Powys: “entirely ignorant not only of old French but of the French language in its modern form.” Self-deprecating in the face of the Murphys’ alleged cosmopolitanism, Larkin nonetheless reads Montherlant until “the jolly old *fin*”.⁵⁹⁹ Raymond Brett may draw a “Psycho-Literary Sketch”⁶⁰⁰ comparing Larkin’s *angst* and anxiety to that of Sartre but up until now there is no evidence that Larkin read Sartre while working on *A Girl in Winter*. Janice Rossen underlines Bruce Montgomery’s important influence on Larkin during his Oxford days⁶⁰¹, so it is not entirely improbable that Larkin encountered *Nausea* via the younger student’s humanist studies. The intertextual parallels between Larkin’s and Sartre’s novel, however, merit a closer look.

Much like Katherine in *A Girl in Winter* Roquentin receives a letter from a former lover, whom he has not heard from in five years. In Larkin’s novel, Katherine is constantly aware of the time as Robin has announced his arrival at midday – “The time was three minutes after one o’ clock”⁶⁰²; “it was a little after quarter to two”;⁶⁰³ “it was fourteen minutes past three”.⁶⁰⁴ In Sartre, Roquentin counts the days until his meeting with past romance: “In four days I shall see Anny again.”⁶⁰⁵

The much-anticipated meeting with the English Anny is an anti-climax; Roquentin is ultimately rejected by Anny in an atmosphere that is strangely reminiscent of the “abstract kindness” between Katherine and Robin: “I have the terrible feeling that we have nothing more to say to one another.”⁶⁰⁶ Roquentin and Katherine share the

⁵⁹⁸ *SL*, p. 658

⁵⁹⁹ *SL*, p. 277

⁶⁰⁰ Raymond L. Brett, “Philip Larkin: A Psycho-Literary Sketch”, in: *About Larkin*, Number 7, April 1999, pp. 1-5

⁶⁰¹ Janice Rossen, “Philip Larkin at Oxford: Chaucer, Langland and Bruce Montgomery”, in: *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 21, No. 2, Winter, 1997-1998, pp. 295-310

⁶⁰² *AGIW*, p. 178

⁶⁰³ *AGIW*, p. 189

⁶⁰⁴ *AGIW*, p. 202

⁶⁰⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, Hayden Carruth (ed.), New Directions, New York, 1964, p. 103

⁶⁰⁶ Sartre 1964, p. 153

existential dilemma, but while Roquentin is overwhelmed by the sheer immensity of being and nothingness, Katherine is one step ahead, living what Roquentin desires after his meeting with Anny: "Now I am going to be like Anny, I am going to outlive myself. Eat, sleep, sleep, eat. Exist slowly, softly, like these trees, like a puddle of water, like the red bench in the streetcar."⁶⁰⁷ The context of existentialism grants *A Girl in Winter* a decidedly continental outlook independent of Katherine's exact origins.

It is perhaps Katherine's foreignness that allows her to make the decision to cut the ties that connect her to the past and a nameless community. In the same way that "strangeness made sense" in "The Importance of Elsewhere" it allows engaging with strangers free from the "customs and establishments" of the home country, it also allows the one logical conclusion: strangeness allows the foreigner to remain strange and foreign in the same way as non-native speakers will find it easier to drop out of or ignore a conversation in the foreign language than native speakers: "I don't really want any friends till I go home again."⁶⁰⁸

This is why Katherine as a non-native speaker has such a vivid image of the voices as her boss, Mr Anstey, quarrels with her aptly-named colleague Miss Feathers: "Mr Anstey's ratchet-like voice was arguing away, Miss Feather's dancing before it like a leaf in a storm."⁶⁰⁹ Interestingly, Larkin chooses a similar image to describe the "foreign talk" of "the Polish airgirl" in his early poem "Like the train's beat". Here, the language "flutters the lips", the language's "whorling notes are pressed/In a bird's throat" and while the speech itself remains unintelligible to the casual eavesdropper on the train, the Polish airgirl's voice together with her "angled beauty" is delightfully "Watering a stony place." Here, Larkin's later assertion "deep down I think foreign languages

⁶⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 157

⁶⁰⁸ *AGIW*, p. 233

⁶⁰⁹ *AGIW*, p. 13

irrelevant”⁶¹⁰ does not hold true: the airgirl “speaks a language of the passions that Larkin is unable to understand”.⁶¹¹ The speaker may not understand it but is utterly fascinated in spite of it, noting the airgirl’s every gesture. Something quite similar occurs in *A Girl in Winter*: describing the river close to the Fennels’ home, Robin’s mother casually remarks: “And it’s mournful in winter.”⁶¹² Katherine still has that fascination with the foreign languages as “[t]his last remark, spoken as it was in a foreign language, came to Katherine with something of the impact of a line of poetry.”⁶¹³ Katherine as a non-native speaker of the English language is still able to see language in the abstract and to be receptive towards its music. Equally, however, Robin and Jane are struck by “a verse of romantic poetry” that Katherine recites in her own language.⁶¹⁴ The fascination with the foreign language works both ways. It is thus that the later comparison in which Katherine does not understand Jane in the same way as “one is not moved by even a poem in a foreign language” does not hold true.⁶¹⁵

Larkin takes every opportunity to demonstrate Katherine’s foreignness, outlining her foreign looks and her language: when she comes downstairs for dinner on her first night with the Fennels, she looks “severe and foreign”.⁶¹⁶ Her

pale, shield-shaped face, dark eyes and eyebrows, and high cheekbones, were not mobile or eloquent. Nor, more curiously, was her mouth, which was too wide and too full-lipped for beauty. [...] Almost she looked as if her lips were bruised and she had to keep them unfamiliarly closed. [...] And when she spoke, it was with a foreign accent.⁶¹⁷

Larkin drops an important hint here: Katherine has to keep her lips “unfamiliarly closed” because she is unfamiliar with the language. Her foreign accent is the result of

⁶¹⁰ *RW*, p. 69

⁶¹¹ Paulin in: Regan 1997, p. 169

⁶¹² *AGIW*, p. 87

⁶¹³ *AGIW*, p. 88

⁶¹⁴ *AGIW*, p. 131

⁶¹⁵ *AGIW*, p. 150

⁶¹⁶ *AGIW*, p. 82

⁶¹⁷ *AGIW*, p. 15/6

that. Missing words in conversation with the Fennels and Robin lets Katherine resort to pantomime only to end with “a half-nervous, half-excited laugh, foreign and gleeful, that she thought might attract him”.⁶¹⁸

Indeed, Katherine learns to use her own and the foreign language to her own purpose: talking to Robin in her own language allows Katherine simultaneously to flirt with Robin and to shut out Jane, who in Katherine’s mind is filling the role of the intruding chaperone. In the dispute about Robin’s telegram with her boss Anstey, Katherine suddenly reveals that she knows about his girlfriend, “drawling out the last three words with an exaggerated foreign accent she had learned annoyed people”.⁶¹⁹ Katherine uses language consciously. Miss Green asserts that Katherine speaks English “awfully well, really” which is perhaps due to English politeness, but is very probable given Katherine’s past and her education that even her boss Anstey alludes to.⁶²⁰ Language and her foreignness thus become weapons with which to defend herself against intruders. In the end, Katherine forbids Robin to speak even as he starts contemplating a potential marriage: “Don’t say any more. I’m too tired.”⁶²¹ Tellingly in the Larkinesque context and despite her initial expectations and remembered romantic feelings for Robin, she eventually treats him with an abstract kindness that “was no more than she might show to a fellow-traveller in a railway-carriage or on board a steamer”.⁶²²

In Larkin’s mature poetry his speakers do not tend to display even this abstract kindness. They find it hard to engage with fellow travellers at all – despite his enthusiasm, the speaker in “The Whitsun Weddings” remains a silent witness to the bustle of the weddings not speaking to anyone on board the train; the speaker in

⁶¹⁸ *AGIW*, p. 87

⁶¹⁹ *AGIW*, p. 210

⁶²⁰ *AGIW*, p. 55

⁶²¹ *AGIW*, p. 248

⁶²² *AGIW*, p. 237

“Autobiography at an Air-Station” consciously decides against making friends with his fellow travellers; the speaker in “Single to Belfast” merely listens to far-away voices from the safety of his secluded cabin on the night boat – without having to consider the language barrier. Katherine uses language and her foreignness as a shield to guard her detached stoicism. Tom Paulin’s critique of Katherine’s lack of foreign words – “She thinks, feels and speaks entirely in English.”⁶²³ – is thus simply not justified. Carol Rumens underlines this, creating the neologism “translationese” to highlight “a particular kind of English [...] to convey Katherine’s voice when she is speaking her own language.”⁶²⁴ The slight inflection of grammar that Rumens notes is almost imperceptible to the non-native speaker of English.

Reading *A Girl in Winter* Paulin betrays a certain impatience with the fact that Larkin “refuses [...] to describe the events that subsequently bring her [Katherine] back to England as a wartime refugee.”⁶²⁵ Larkin keeps Katherine’s origins in the dark while repeatedly and consistently asserting her foreignness: “‘foreign’ is the novel’s recurrent, multiply-laden adjective.” Paulin hints that Katherine may be German, a suggestion that is developed in Rumens’s essay.

Rumens argues that Larkin consistently hints at Katherine’s nationality to the extent that he “has not only fully worked out Katherine’s origins; he wishes his readers to know what they are, without going so far as to tell us straight.” For Rumens, the hints Larkin gives “seem to point clearly to that enormously difficult place in the Larkin family psyche, *père er fils* – Germany.”⁶²⁶ According to Rumens, the evidence of Katherine’s Germanness is overwhelming. The outfit Katherine puts on for dinner on her first night with the Fennels with “the dark brown skirt, white shirt and dark brown

⁶²³ Paulin in: Regan 1997, p. 168

⁶²⁴ Carol Rumens, “‘I don’t understand cream cakes, but I eat them’: Distance and difference in *A Girl in Winter*”, in: *About Larkin*, Number 19, April 2010, p.8

⁶²⁵ Paulin in: Regan, 1997, p. 168

⁶²⁶ Rumens 2010, p. 10

tie pinned with a small Olympic badge”⁶²⁷ is – as Rumens suggests – indeed reminiscent of the uniform of the “Bund Deutscher Mädel” (BDM), the girl branch of the Hitlerjugend in 1930s Germany. From 1936 onwards, membership was compulsory for girls from ten to 18 years of age. However, the standard uniform of the BDM was made up of a navy skirt, white shirt and a black neckerchief with a leather slide.⁶²⁸ Katherine’s strangely formal outfit with its brown skirt and brown tie may remind the reader of Nazi uniforms (the German *braun* still denotes questionable political sympathies to this day), but Rumens seems to jump to conclusions here, all too readily assuming what Larkin chooses not to disclose.

Indeed, there is a purpose to the details of Katherine’s outfit on a much more basic level. Katherine’s neat dress is directly set against the perpetually untidy clothing of Jane, the Fennels’ daughter. On her first encounter Katherine is still wearing her formal outfit, while Jane wears a “pale shapeless skirt and no socks”.⁶²⁹ Going for a walk through the village, Jane wears “a raffish check shirt that contrasted with the Sunday sedateness of the other two.”⁶³⁰ One morning, Jane has “a dressing gown drawn shapelessly round her, not a smart one: it looked like a relic of childhood.”⁶³¹ The contrast between Katherine’s and Jane’s outfits serves to underline the difference not only between the two girls who do not become friends, but between Katherine’s status as well-behaved, foreign visitor and Jane’s listlessness. It is significant in the context of clothing that the later Katherine appears as slightly outmoded because she holds on to her old clothes: her “leather motoring coat [...] was a relic of her student days. [...] she hated to part with anything. Although she was not keen on mending, she spent many evenings darning stockings and underwear with a sort of love for them. They were all

⁶²⁷ *AGIW*, p. 82

⁶²⁸ <http://www.bdmhistory.com/research/summer.html> accessed online 17/06/2012

⁶²⁹ *AGIW*, p. 85

⁶³⁰ *AGIW*, p. 94

⁶³¹ *AGIW*, p. 105

she had left.”⁶³² Her old, mended clothes stand in a neat contrast to what she takes with her when she first comes to England to stay with the Fennels: her suitcase “contained all her best clothes, freshly cleaned, washed or pressed, as if she were passing into another life and were concerned that only her finest things should go with her.”⁶³³ Clothing becomes an emblem of loneliness and thus emphasizes Katherine’s isolated position: “She was reluctant to part with her old clothes and start wearing English ones.” If clothing functions as the visible part of one’s identity, it is probably of no consequence whatsoever whether the formal dress Katherine wears on her first night with the Fennels has any Nazi association.

The “Olympic badge” that Katherine wears in the novel can be seen in a similar light. The badge might indeed be a souvenir of the 1936 Olympics in Berlin leading the reader to make a German connection – something Rumens readily does. However, wearing the Olympic badge is not necessarily an indication of Katherine’s nationality. After all, one of the chief characteristics of the Olympic Games is that they are international. Larkin merely plays with allusions, confounding his mostly English readership, thus underlining one of Katherine’s own conclusions in the novel: “the English she found [...] were characterized in time of war by antagonism to *every* foreign country, friendly or unfriendly, as a simple matter of instinct.”⁶³⁴ [emphasis mine].

Indeed, there may be a Scandinavian ring to Katherine’s surname – to the native speaker of German it sounds rather Swiss or Austrian – but Rumens suggests that the surname may be an outcome of assimilation in which “Jewish emigrants often adopted safe-sounding non-Jewish names connected to fruit, vegetables, animals, etc., and ‘Lind’ of course means ‘lime’.”⁶³⁵ “Lime” is of course *Linde* in German and a small

⁶³² *AGIW*, p. 182

⁶³³ *AGIW*, p. 72

⁶³⁴ *AGIW*, p. 22

⁶³⁵ Rumens 2010, p. 11

excursus into German etymology shows that the Middle High German “lind” means “soft”, “mild” or “bendy” which makes a profound contrast to the rigid stoicism and coldness Katherine displays in the novel. Might Larkin indeed be consciously employing notions of German etymology? He was well-versed enough in the German language to casually end a sentence with the German filler “und so weiter”.⁶³⁶ However, had Larkin wanted to make Katherine unmistakably German, he could have chosen a name like Müller or Meier. If he had wanted her to be unmistakably Jewish, he could have picked Rothschild or Blumenthal. The point is: he does not. Instead, he chooses a relatively cosmopolitan name that would not raise eyebrows in either Denmark or Poland.

Another clue to Katherine’s alleged Germanness – the most convincing one in Rumens’s eyes – is when Robin takes her punting on the Thames: “If we’d lived in prehistoric times, before England was an island, I could have nearly taken you home. The Thames used to flow into the Rhine.” But then again, the Rhine flows through Switzerland, France, Germany and the Netherlands before it reaches the North Sea. Of these countries we can only definitely rule out France as Katherine’s home country as Robin’s casual remark that “it was a perfect day for seeing across to France” would not make much sense if Katherine herself was French. Robin learns Katherine’s language at school which Rumens takes as an argument that it must be German: Dutch or Swedish were not part of the English curriculum as French and German were.

If Katherine was Swiss - German is one of the four community languages in Switzerland - there would have been hardly any reason to escape “disaster” during the war. Switzerland professed neutrality. Rumens’s suggestion that Katherine is Jewish-German – also grounded on the “racial stereotypes of Jewishness” like Katherine’s dark

⁶³⁶ *SL*, p. 541

complexion, her intellectual background etc. – “imply that the fate Katherine has escaped is that of European Jewry under Nazism.”⁶³⁷ On Katherine’s first Sunday morning with the Fennels, there could be a moment of disclosure as Jane sardonically comments on the Fennels’ lack of church-going: “We are a godless family. [...] But we respect your principles, if you have any. There was some speculation as to whether you’d be Roman Catholic or not.” Katherine replies: “Oh no. I’m not Catholic.” and the moment passes as “Robin looked relieved, and felt for the newspaper.”⁶³⁸ Once more, Larkin leaves Katherine’s personal circumstances almost delightfully in the dark. He does not say that Katherine is Jewish. He also does not say that she is not.

Rumens draws further connections between the novel and Larkin’s personal experience of Germany. Young Philip’s visits to Germany took him to Königswinter, just south of Cologne, “not far from the Rhine”.⁶³⁹ Translating the name of the city into English would make it “King’s Winter” which is not too far removed from Larkin’s working title for the novel: *The Kingdom of Winter*. However, what about Wernigerode and Kreuznach, the other German places Philip visited with Sydney? Bruce Montgomery’s title for the novel, *Winterreich*, would make the Nazi Germany association even clearer. Larkin’s only half-serious working title *A Frosty Answer* on the other hand places a greater emphasis on the “winter”-part of the original working title, shunning all possible associations with Germany.⁶⁴⁰ Larkin writes to Sutton in February 1945: “I am casting vainly about for a title for my novel (referred to at present simply as ‘Katherine’, the name of the chief character) and think it will have something to do with winter.”⁶⁴¹ *A Girl in Winter* is thus the title that perfectly captures the novel’s main point: Katherine, along with her immediate past and future and despite arguably

⁶³⁷ Rumens 2010, p. 11

⁶³⁸ *AGIW*, p. 93

⁶³⁹ Rumens 2010, p. 10

⁶⁴⁰ *SL*, p. 123

⁶⁴¹ *SL*, p. 97

well-placed clues, remains elusive. She is neither *The Girl in Winter*, nor is she *A Girl in England*. Paradoxically, Larkin's first novel *Jill* makes an imaginary girl more tangible, more readily identifiable than *A Girl in Winter*'s real girl in a real place. While family life with the Fennels (complete with a new addition to the family in the form of Jack Stormalong) is sketched out in some detail, Katherine's parents and grandparents are only mentioned in passing. The fact that no family members or relatives are mentioned in the later part of the novel is somewhat unrealistic. She must have family members somewhere, and if they are all dead then that is even more worthy of mention as it would complete her total isolation. In some way, that makes Jill or Gillian more real than Katherine.

Despite the "realness" of her daily routine – she works, eats, sleeps – Katherine remains a stranger to the reader as much as she remains a stranger in a place that does not even have a name. In *A Girl in Winter*, the town itself becomes non-place in Augé's original sense: there is a recognizable infrastructure of libraries, buses, dentist's and shops but this is not where Katherine has her family or cultural roots. The reader is left in the dark as to where exactly in England we are in the same way that Katherine has to count the steps to find her way back to her attic apartment in the blacked-out city. Katherine is not completely lost, but she is not home either. The same is true for the pastoral alternative place in Katherine's English summer holiday. We learn that Katherine is picked up in Dover, is driven past London and there are visits to Oxford, but we never learn the name of the Fennels' village: "I had looked in some books about England to see if I could find anything of it, but there was nothing." Soldier Robin is on embarkation leave. It would have been easy for Larkin to send him to France or straight to Germany, but he does not mention a specific place. Katherine asks whether he knows where they are going and he replies: "Oh, well, not officially. They tell us on board. We

can guess pretty well.”⁶⁴² Even here Larkin refuses to bring the war context into the foreground; Robin is neither the World War II version of Rupert Brooke’s “The Soldier” nor do we get an idea of the horror of war as in Owen’s WWI poem “Dulce Et Decorum Est”. Typically, Larkin homes in on the individual. However, in this case, the individual is less a character than an emblem of alienation from society.

The “placeless-ness”⁶⁴³ that Rumens accords to Katherine resurfaces in Larkin’s mature poetry. The speaker of “Friday Night in the Royal Station Hotel” knows that “all the salesmen have gone back to Leeds”, the poem does not inform us where the Royal Station Hotel is. The train in “I Remember, I Remember” has already left Coventry station when the speaker relates how his “childhood was unspent”. In “The Whitsun Weddings” the speaker thinks of “London spread out in the sun” but never actually sets foot on a London platform. Mr Bleaney’s holidays are spent in Frinton or Stoke, the speaker in “Mr Bleaney” remains in his “hired box”, we do not know where. Katherine’s character is thus an exercise in the profound alienation so many of Larkin’s mature speakers share.

The “many clues as to Katherine’s nationality – too many for us not to suppose that they have been quite deliberately deployed” Rumens presents do not add up to compelling evidence regarding Katherine’s origins.⁶⁴⁴ Rumens grants this, but nonetheless concludes that on an artistic level “explicitness about Katherine’s origins would surely have enhanced rather than harmed a story.” For Rumens, the reason why Larkin never grants Katherine her own story lies either in the fact that a novel with an obviously “German heroine might have been difficult to market” – or near impossible to market at that time! - or in the fact that Larkin “could have modelled Katherine on an

⁶⁴² *AGIW*, p. 245

⁶⁴³ Rumens 2010, p. 11

⁶⁴⁴ Rumens 2010, p. 10

actual person, emigrant or refugee, who did not wish [...] to have her identity exposed.”⁶⁴⁵ Indeed, this might be the case. Miriam Plaut, a ‘displaced’ German Jew, to whom Larkin gave one of the four typescripts of his *Sugar and Spice*, claimed that she was the ‘original’ of Katherine, and that her ‘shield-shaped face’ and forcible manner were incorporated into the characterisation. Moreover her nickname was ‘Kitty’. Larkin, however, remarked inscrutably that her claim was “not very true”.⁶⁴⁶

However, I do not agree with Rumens. The novel would have been harmed considerably had Larkin freely offered the details of Katherine’s presumed flight from central Europe. Clearly identifying Katherine as German and Jewish would have shifted the focus from the painful, acute sensation of the here and now, from Katherine’s complete isolation, to the disastrous, politically-motivated odyssey of a Jewish girl in wartime Europe. The historical background would have imbued the novel with “too much” meaning watering down the essential emotion: in *A Girl in Winter* Larkin successfully evokes the feeling of acute isolation, of not being part of any given community that comes to dominate his mature poetry. This, however, comes at the cost of also estranging the reader who has no grounds to identify with the protagonist. Rumens is herself aware that the question of Katherine’s Germanness is hardly central to the novel as Larkin “register[s] acutely what it felt to be foreigner, and combined this with his artistic conception of the outsider to create an impressive existential protagonist, a stranger who would bequeath him the most authentic and distilled of his several poetic voices.”⁶⁴⁷

Larkin’s personal experience of the continent would have made it difficult for him to give Katherine anything but a German tinge. It would not have been any problem for

⁶⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 11

⁶⁴⁶ Kingsley Amis, *The Letters of Kingsley Amis*, Zachary Leader (ed.), HarperCollins Publishers, New York, 2000, p. 925fn.

⁶⁴⁷ Rumens 2010, p. 12

him to give her an unmistakably German name, the papers at wartime could have let him sketch a Jewish odyssey and he would have had no trouble in giving Katherine German words, even very specifically German words like “Schifferklavier”. However, granting her words in her own language would have destroyed the impression of total alienation. If Katherine had been able to speak her native language, even if she had only resorted to her mother language when cursing her boss, this would have given her an identity, an anchor that allows her to highlight her allegiance with a community. But she is denied even that. Broken English would have clearly characterised her as a foreigner, but in the context of the novel her proficiency in English is even worse: it further removes her from her social, cultural place. There is nothing of the foreign, talkative grace of Larkin’s Polish airgirl in Katherine.

With all the “clues” Rumens identifies as pointing towards Katherine’s alleged Germanness, Larkin cunningly puts the reader in the position of everyone else Katherine encounters in the in the part of the novel set in the present-time England: they might have made assumptions about her personal history, but no-one can tell for sure. Larkin allows us to make ready assumptions, but they are neither confirmed nor proven wrong. The reader cannot get a hold of Katherine in the same way as neither her colleagues nor Robin can get a hold of her. Despite the fact that Robin knows where she is from and Katherine freely relates “the events that had led up to her arrival in England [...] in a way that freed them of much of their unpleasantness, and made them sound like a series of actions taken of her own will”⁶⁴⁸ she remains a stranger. Katherine tells her own story as if she had overcome the existential dilemma at her own will, but her isolation remains complete. Katherine Lind in her self-preserving detachedness does not provoke the compassion the reader feels for, say, an Anne Frank in *The Diary of a*

⁶⁴⁸ *AGIW*, p. 230/1

Young Girl.

Larkin's overly clever play with the concept of continental existentialism and his obstinate and not altogether necessary insistence on concealing Katherine's origins are perhaps what made Larkin declare "I can't *bear* to look at *A G. in W.*: it seems so knowing and smart"⁶⁴⁹ and "I can't open it without a profuse and thoroughgoing embarrassment"⁶⁵⁰ a few years later. The novel is perhaps too clever and over-determinedly poetic, but that essential Larkinesque emotion, isolation, is already firmly in place. Larkin could have given his second novel an additional dynamic by granting Katherine a tragic history and concern for lost relatives, but this would have taken from *A Girl in Winter* its existential bleakness and the almost Kafkaesque alienation. The fact that Larkin refuses to relate specific personal or political histories endows the novel with a diffuse universality that *The Diary of a Young Girl* cannot possibly claim for itself. Anne Frank is forever associated with the specific horrors of the Nazi regime, while Katherine Lind poses as a necessary stepping stone in Larkin's development: the novel's diffuseness will be redeemed in his mature poetry.

While Katherine may or may not have a tragic history, Anne Frank *is* a European Jew who eventually becomes a victim of the Holocaust. Her diary, written during a two-year period of hiding in Amsterdam in order to escape deportation and published in the same year as *A Girl in Winter*, is a highly intimate, personal account of Anne's time in cramped quarters with her own family and even more cramped quarters as another family moves in. Anne starts her diary at the age of 13, casually records how life for European Jews becomes more and more difficult as the Nazis advance into the Netherlands, but also records the sensations of puberty and first love – the romantic but ultimately disappointing relationship with Peter, the son of the van Pels family who are

⁶⁴⁹ *SL*, p. 334

⁶⁵⁰ *SL*, p. 263

also in hiding – which make *Het Achterhuis* (the original Dutch title) a coming-of-age narrative.

Anne Frank's autobiographical story is in many aspects the direct counter draft to *A Girl in Winter*. Anne is a European Jew who is ultimately killed in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp and who acutely records Jewish discrimination. We do not learn anything about the “disaster” Katherine fled from in Europe, we only know she has made her way to England and relative safety. Both Anne and Katherine receive their respective first kisses in the course of the narrative, but while Anne records her emotions, the reader is almost brutally torn from Katherine's confusing summer scene in a punt with the English Robin to be suddenly drawn back into the present; to snowy England and a grown-up, hardened Katherine. Katherine's coming-of-age is purposefully cut out of the narrative. Due to the cramped circumstances of their hiding-place, Anne is uncomfortably, physically close to the members of her family and the other lodgers; Katherine lives alone and is completely isolated from her family: “At least her birthplace and the street she walked in were sharing the same night, however many unfruitful miles were between them.”⁶⁵¹ She will find no comfort in renewing an acquaintance. Anne is emotional and talkative; Katherine locks her emotions in and hardly speaks to anyone. Anne is tragically killed; Katherine drifts off into a sleep that numbs all emotions. Anne's diary ends with an appeal never to forget; Katherine does her best to blank out the past. In the end, she even closes the book on the golden memories of her summer with Robin Fennel. It is a neat coincidence that Anne Frank considered the surname “Robin” as the pseudonym for her own family name.⁶⁵²

Much like her nationality, it remains elusive whether Katherine and Robin actually

⁶⁵¹ *AGIW*, p. 224

⁶⁵² Anne Frank, *The Diary of Anne Frank: The Critical Edition*, David Barnouw (ed.), Double Day, New York, 1989, p. 61; p. 455

sleep together at the end of the novel. Rumens notes how “the triumphant vindication of youthful hopes”⁶⁵³ simply does not occur and indeed: shared intimacy, however fleeting, would seriously disturb the novel’s rigour. Sex in whatever shape is always a point of human contact. Katherine denies herself even this spark of humanity. Thus, the end of *A Girl in Winter* corresponds to the exchange of intimacy for silence that resurfaces in Larkin’s “Talking in Bed”. In Katherine’s and Robin’s case the words that could potentially be “not untrue and not unkind” revolve around the annoying ticking of Katherine’s wristwatch.

A Girl in Winter does not allow for a specifically German perspective. Ultimately, it does not matter where Katherine is from. On a less prominent level this has perhaps something to do with the fact that Larkin’s real experience of Germany disqualifies the place as blissful imagined Other. Through jazz, Larkin can easily project an ideal America; his “few visits to Germany left hardly any impression”.⁶⁵⁴ The impression Germany left is that of a stranger in a strange land and so the novel homes in on Katherine’s individual and composed desolation and isolation independent of any specific nationality. Employing a kind of Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*, taking the perspective of the female foreigner stranded in an anonymous, unaccommodating, strange England, allows Larkin to gauge the depth of emotions and metaphors connected with complete human isolation. Slowly discarding the obvious ingredients of Katherine’s particular isolation - foreignness, femaleness, a failed love affair, unsympathetic colleagues, no friends or relations and the desolate wintry cityscape in a country at war - allows Larkin to approach the universal essence of loneliness. Sketching the difference between novels and poetry, Larkin explains how “novels are

⁶⁵³ Rumens 2010, p. 111

⁶⁵⁴ *SL*, p. 137

about other people and poems are about yourself".⁶⁵⁵ *A Girl in Winter* as Larkin's "prose poem"⁶⁵⁶ exists in the curious equilibrium between the two. The speakers' isolation in Larkin's mature poetry has to rely no longer on obvious cultural signposts.

⁶⁵⁵ *RW*, p. 49

⁶⁵⁶ *FR*, p. 49

Conclusion

While the majority of critical volumes on Larkin's work are indeed written by native speakers of English whose cultural and national identity is largely congruent with Larkin's own⁶⁵⁷, the perspective from the other side of the English Channel is of singular merit. It is this particular perspective which allows a somewhat clearer-sighted look at Larkin's literary nationalities. If cultural and national identities are fixed from birth and if the idea of the contemporary unrooted cosmopolitan is an illusion, then the only way to transcend narrow cultural borders is an engagement with cultural Otherness. Despite his publicly asserted aversion to foreign languages, foreign poetry and abroad in general, Larkin's poetry and prose engage with multiple foreign cultures, poetics and literary theories on a level of profundity that can hardly be overlooked. Furthermore, it is the concept of non-place that allows Larkin to negotiate literary nationalities without a loss of personal identity. Common humanity and recognizable experiences are the lowest common denominators that render Larkin's poetry universally accessible independent of specific cultural identities.

True to the idea of the rooted cosmopolitan, Larkin's engagement with his native England in his poetry is clearly less culturally obvious than generally assumed. Larkin dodges cultural narrowness by realizing place along the lines of Marc Augé's theory of non-place. Non-place in its abstractedness is set against the "customs and establishments" of rooted anthropological place and is thus instantly recognizable.

⁶⁵⁷ As exemptions to the rule, the work of Raphael Ingelbien and Istvan Racz springs to mind. Both have written brilliantly and extensively on Larkin.

Larkin writes for readers who share his experiences; the non-place is a point of universal contact between poet and recipient.

Larkin's pastoral is a negotiation with a particular literary tradition that is often seen to be quintessentially English. However, Larkin's pastoral does away with the hazy, golden nostalgia of an imagined Arcadia and substitutes for this a potent nostalgia for the present. It is this quality of the "here-and-now" with an undeceived look at the deficiency of Arcadia from the word go that allows Larkin to realize pastoral the way it was originally conceived by Theocritus.

Engaging with an Irish literary nationality allows Larkin to set his perception of place against that of Heaney, paradoxically realizing Patrick Kavanagh's distinction between the provincial and the parochial. Strikingly, there is a cross-current between the poetry of Larkin and that of Derek Mahon which perhaps underlines their similarity of approach. However, despite attempting to turn away from the concept, Mahon fails to overcome the influence of anthropological place while Larkin's negotiation of England and Ireland is most commonly misread.

Jules Laforgue is Larkin's point of reference in French culture. Indeed, the imagery of Laforgue permeates much of Larkin's poetry. As opposed to many critics' perception, Laforgue's influence is direct and only marginally mediated by Eliot. Larkin's temperate modernism is a direct result of his engagement with French Symbolism. His poem "The Card-Players" is the climax of Larkin's version of modernism.

Larkin accesses America through jazz. It is jazz that allows him to extrapolate a temperate modernism; a modernism that many critics fail to accord to Larkin. Furthermore jazz is one of many connection points of Larkin's poetry with the poetry of the Beat Generation. Larkin shares many of their inherent values. Transcending the mere influence of jazz, however, Larkin actively engages with American poetry, most

notably the confessional poetry of Robert Lowell and Sylvia Plath. The poetry of Plath functions as a striking reference point for Larkin underlining a close thematic proximity of subject matter in both poets.

Germany is Larkin's most obvious reference point as far as felt knowledge of the place is concerned. While it is clearly debatable whether Katherine Lind, the heroine of Larkin's novel *A Girl in Winter* is indeed German, it is all the more striking that Larkin adopts the stance of the female foreigner to come to terms with the essential concepts of isolation and alienation serving as the blueprint for much of his mature poetry.

Through negotiating literary nationalities Larkin becomes a universal poet. It is no coincidence that the statue of Philip Larkin at Hull Paragon Station is turning his back on the city facing the direction of the platforms and departing trains. The foreign scholar is not necessarily required to cross the Channel in order to assimilate Larkin's poetry. Larkin comes to us. Just like his statue, with long, purposeful strides and little baggage.

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Title References

Thesis Title: “I don’t really notice where I live”; RW, p. 54

Chapter 1: “Not only in England, but anywhere in the world”; FR, p. 78
“No, I have never found/The place” - “Places, Loved Ones”

Chapter 2: “And that will be England gone” - “Going, Going”

Chapter 3: “Looking out at the continual movement of mad Irish”; SL, p. 167

Chapter 4: “Like a slightly unconvincing translation from a French Symbolist. I wish I could write like this more often” quoted in: Regan, 1997, p. 45

Chapter 5: “My chief expectancy centres on these records that are reputedly on their way from Yankland”; SL, p. 186

Chapter 6: “I prefer my own taste in these things”; SL, p. 247

Chapter 7: “Quite at a loss with the Oxfordshire accent”; AGIW, p. 133

