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Epistolary Larkin: Life, Letters and the Literary Biography

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‘What one writes is based so much on the kind of person one is, the kind of environment one has had and has now.’ (Philip Larkin)

For my parents

Abstract

'Epistolary Larkin' is the first comprehensive study to focus primarily on Philip Larkin's letters as literary constructs. The publication of Anthony Thwaite's *Philip Larkin: Selected Letters 1940-1985* (1992) caused widespread division across the critical landscape of Larkin studies. On one side, the letters are the key to reveal attitudes and motivations from Larkin's life and unlock the literary texts. On the other are critics who draw on contradictions in Larkin's letters to reveal their unreliability for approaching the work. Recently, critics have attempted to find a middle ground between reading the letters as biographical lens, or an unreliable witness to the life. However, within these studies there is still an attempt to disentangle the 'real' Larkin from the literary constructs. The originality of this thesis is that it does not search for the 'real' Larkin in the letters but instead presents the letters as constructions of Larkin's epistolary worlds. For Larkin, the letter allowed him to step out of his reality and enter an imaginative world with his reader.

This thesis is the first study to bring the three editions of Larkin's letters – *Selected Letters* (1992), *Letters to Monica* (2010), *Letters Home* (2018) – to centre stage of Larkin scholarship. Conventionally, Larkin's letters have always maintained a secondary position to the poetry, prose and short stories. However, here the letters take precedence. Through detailed examination of these editions and unpublished letters, this thesis offers fresh perspectives on Larkin's epistolary worlds, which are no longer presented as windows onto the life but as literary texts themselves. In doing so, 'Epistolary Larkin' not only makes a significant contribution to our understanding of Larkin as a writer but also intervenes in recent debates about the more unpalatable views – on racism, women, and children – that successive editions of Larkin's letters have been shown to reveal.

Contents

Introduction

James Underwood, in his study ‘Philip Larkin’s Textual Identities’, describes the collapse of Philip Larkin’s reputation as ‘perhaps the greatest in the twentieth century’ (Underwood, 2015, p. 5). His observation is warranted after reading reviews for Anthony Thwaite’s *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin 1940-1985* in 1992. For Tom Paulin

> This selection stands as a distressing and in many ways revolting compilation, which imperfectly reveals and conceals the sewer under the national monument Larkin became. (Paulin, 1992, p. 15)

With every fall there is a rise, and throughout that climb are a launch of endeavours to restore dignity and respect. One of the more significant attempts to restore Larkin’s reputation has been the release of Thwaite’s second edition of letters in 2010, *Letters to Monica*. Rather than an exposure of obscenity, this edition has been considered an endearing but honest reflection of the ‘real’ Larkin:

> Philip Larkin is the best loved poet of the past 100 years, and these irresistibly readable letters reveal the life and personality more intimately than before […] He is constantly and inventively funny, concocting parodies and spoofs with loving care. (Carey, 2010)

In 2018, James Booth published the long-anticipated *Philip Larkin: Letters Home 1936-1977*, which attempted to out-do *Selected Letters* and present an even more intimate correspondence than *Letters to Monica.* According to one review, it did exactly that:

> The letters, affectionate and humorous, frequently accompanied by Larkin’s doodles / drawings confirm that the closest relationship in Philip’s life was his bond with his mother. At the same time, they are a very clear insight into the life of the most appreciated English poet of the mid-twentieth century. (Finchan, 2019, p. 112)

As noted by Amanda Gilroy and W.M Verhoeven, ‘traditionally, non-fictional letters were regarded as an unproblematic historical source, giving us unmediated access to a writer’s thoughts’ (Verhoeven, 2000, p. 121). Evidently, all three editions of Larkin’s letters have

been read in this light. What is more, they are *all* individually considered to have revealed the 'true' Larkin. Larkin scholarship is thus left with a very important – albeit unanswerable – question: which edition contains the most authentic Larkin? This is a question this study will address – not by searching for or unveiling the 'real' Larkin, but by demonstrating that none of the editions expose Philip Larkin the man, but rather reveal Philip Larkin the writer. David Barton and Nigel Hall remark that 'despite its prevalence there has been little study of letters as a genre, compared, for example, with poetry or the novel' (Hall, 2000, p. 2). Indeed, many studies – John Osborne's *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence: A Case of Wrongful Conviction* (2008), Gillian Steinberg's *Philip Larkin and his Audiences* (2010), James Underwood's 'Philip Larkin's Textual Identities' (2015) – have acknowledged the value of Larkin's letters but the primary focus of these studies has been to remove biographical interpretation and redirect Larkin scholars back to the texts themselves. In this thesis, however, for the first time the letters will be taking precedence. More specifically, 'Epistolary Larkin' will explore the three editions of Larkin's letters – as well as a cache of unpublished correspondences – to demonstrate that Larkin's letters are more literary than they are biographical. Whilst these letters do, of course, allow the reader to piece together parts of Larkin's life, the central idea here is that the letters highlight how Larkin used the epistle as a door to step out of that reality. In them, he creates fictional worlds for himself and his correspondents. Though the primary focus is on the letters themselves, Larkin's literary texts – short stories, novels, poetry – will be drawn upon throughout the thesis only to further exemplify how these imaginative spheres in the letters are a recurrent feature throughout all Larkin's writing, and throughout his career. This study is specifically structured to illuminate this argument by being divided up into three parts. Each part will explore the published editions of letters individually and will be in chronological order of publication (Part I: *Selected Letters* (1992), Part II: *Letters to Monica* (2010), Part III: *Letters Home* (2010)). My

reasoning for structuring the study around editions of the letters is twofold: the first is to unveil how readers' perceptions of Larkin have altered with each publication; the second, and the more important of the two, as each edition has been met by the public eye, to demonstrate how each edition successively has helped reveal the fictional world – or worlds – that Larkin composed for each of his correspondents. Only occasionally visited by reality, Larkin's fictional worlds live side by side one another in each separate series of correspondence as silent neighbours, never crossing over from one correspondent to another. However, this study will expose the worlds Larkin constructs as central for reading Larkin's letters. Before doing so, however, it is important to lay out my rationale for completing a study on Larkin's letters and to outline where the key idea of viewing Larkin's epistolary writing as a metaphorical door to escape reality originated.

The Literature at a Glance

In his 2008 monograph, *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence: A Case of Wrongful Conviction*, John Osborne notes that 'of the twenty to thirty critical books and sixty or so worthwhile essays on Larkin, well over ninety percent employ the biographical approach' (Osborne, 2008, pp. 24-5). Following on from Larkin's own premeditative declaration 'poems are about yourself' (Larkin, 1983, p. 49), his poetry has often been read biographically. Before his death in 1985, Anthony Thwaite edited a collection of essays, *Larkin at Sixty* (1982), that sparked considerable interest in Larkin's life. The collection contains a number of personal anecdotes from friends and contemporaries which reads more like a celebration of his life than his work. Indeed, it was the first 'study' of Larkin to intertwine his life with the literary. Following his death, and the publication in his lifetime of four slim volumes of poetry, came the first release of Thwaite's *Philip Larkin Selected Letters: 1940-1985* in 1992. The next year saw the publication of Larkin's first authorised biography: *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life* by one of his literary executors, Andrew Motion. In

light of this over the next decade, as Osborne notes, critics became fixated on the life, or more accurately, on the negative versions of it popularised in Thwaite's *Selected Letters* and Motion's biography. The implications of this will be explored later. Since then, Larkin's letters have caused as much debate as his poetry – if not more – leaving critics and biographers either condemning Larkin, defending him, or arguing whether we should use the letters as biographical evidence at all. Either way, his letters continue to be referenced and remain central to Larkin studies.

More recently, Larkin scholarship has produced two more biographical accounts of Larkin: the first a more personal remembrance: *The Philip Larkin I Knew* by Maeve Brennan in 2002, followed by Richard Bradford's new biography *First Boredom, Then Fear: The Life of Philip Larkin* in 2005. Bradford's biography combines both literary and biographical readings of Larkin's life and writing. He argues that Larkin 'played different roles for different people' and poses a central question in Larkin scholarship: how do we 'claim to know the real Philip Larkin'? (Bradford, 2005, p. 16). His biography aided in altering views on Larkin's letters, and Larkin's life more generally, by offering up to readers the possibility that Motion's biography and *Selected Letters* are not just *life* studies of Larkin but are in fact significant contributions to the *literary* study of his writing.

By 2008, in *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence*, John Osborne casts Larkin's biography aside. He undermines what he considers to be 'wrongful', biographical, readings of Larkin's poetry by focusing on the literariness of Larkin's writings: adoption of personae; literary allusions; leitmotifs. This return of focus to the writing is carried through to Gillian Steinberg's *Philip Larkin and his Audiences* in 2010. In Larkin's poetry, Steinberg detects a swathe of voices and a manipulation of audience. However, unlike Osborne, Steinberg does draw on Larkin's letters – particularly those written to Oxford contemporary Kingsley Amis – but only to exemplify her argument about the literariness of the texts.

2010 saw not only Steinberg's insightful contributions, but also the publication of Thwaite's second edition of letters, *Philip Larkin: Letters to Monica.* This led to a shift in Larkin studies: before this, the primary defence for Larkin's reputation was a redirection away from the letters and back to the poetry. However, as *Letters to Monica* revealed a caring, affectionate, intimate Larkin, these letters, then, were often drawn upon either alongside, or as a key to, the poetry. Often, this was in an attempt to present a more palatable view of Larkin. James Booth's biography, *Philip Larkin: Life, Art and Love* (2014), is a case in point. By drawing on Archie Burnett's *Philip Larkin: The Complete Poems*, which was released a few years earlier in 2011, Booth explores many of these new poems, alongside *Letters to Monica*, in light of the new and improved Larkin that had merged following publication of Thwaite's second edition of letters.

In 2015, Larkin scholarship can note a shift back once again. After a short return to the biographical, in this year Larkin's literary texts are once again dragged to the fore. However, as is the case in Steinberg's study, the letters continue to play a vital role. James Underwood's 'Philip Larkin's Textual Identities' illuminates Larkin's multitude of personae in both his letters and his literary texts. Rather than offering a prosecution or defence for Larkin's character, Underwood simply uses letters, poetry and the short stories, to highlight to readers that the focus of investigation should be literary, not biographical.

Since then, *Philip Larkin: Letters Home* (edited by Booth) has been released in 2018. Though this edition was created primarily for biographical insight, the letters within it reveal more literariness than ever before. Revealing, once again, a different version of Larkin as the affectionate, devoted and loyal son, *Letters Home* exemplifies how he created fictional worlds though epistolary writing. My exploration of these letters as fictional will allow my readers to recognise that Larkin was always trying to escape reality in his writing rather than writing about his reality. The originality of this study lies primarily in stretching beyond

Bradford, Steinberg, and Booth by drawing on all three editions of letters now available to us and reading these letters as fictional texts. Moreover, this is the first study to focus its' entirety on Larkin's letters as primary rather than drawing on them as secondary evidence. His literary writing – poetry, prose, and essays – will in turn be drawn upon as secondary evidence to solidify the primary argument that in his writing Larkin created imaginary worlds allowing him to hinge between the real and the constructed. By doing so, we move further away from the biographical mis-readings of Larkin's poems and letters that have continued to cause damage to his reputation. The first task, however, is to illuminate these readings and consider where these mis-readings began.

Larkin, Letters and the Literary Biography

> Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears;
> I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him.
> The evil that men do lives after them;
> The good is oft interred with their bones;
> So let it be with Caesar. (Shakespeare, 2001, pp. Act 3, Scene 2, 1-5)

In the years that followed Philip Larkin's death in 1985, it looked as though the 'good' was buried with Larkin, and the 'evil' – or supposed evil – lived on.

During an exhibition in 1980, Larkin spoke of D.H. Lawrence's reputation as one that 'has been made up of two great waves of admiration; the first for the man, that produced all the personal accounts of him after his death, and the second for his works, originating in the pages of *Scrutiny* in Leavis's study' (Thwaite, 2001, p. 44). However, for Larkin, it was different. Rather than 'two waves' – one for the man, one for the work – there tended to only be one wave. Since Larkin declared that poetry was about 'yourself', many readers have found it impossible to separate Larkin from his work. In fact, this was something which Larkin almost encouraged. In 1955, Larkin wrote a brief statement about his views on poetry. It was initially published in 1956 in Japan, when D. J. Enright asked for contributors for

Poets of the 1950s. In his own collection, *Required Writing*, Larkin reprinted the statement which sets the scene for how his poetry was typically read:

> I write poems to preserve things I have seen / thought / felt (if I may so indicate a composite and complex experience) 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. Why I should do this I have no idea, but I think the impulse to preserve lies at the bottom of all art. Generally my poems are related, therefore, to my own personal life, but by no means always, since I can imagine horses I have never seen or the emotions of a bride without ever having been a woman or married. (Larkin, 1983, p. 79)

From this, many readers can take away the idea that in poems such as 'This be the Verse', 'Dockery and Son', 'Self's the Man', where the speaker is identifiably male, that these poems likely to be based on Larkin's life. Whereas in poems such as 'Love Songs in Age' and 'Maiden Name', readers would assume – from the gender of the speaker – that such poems are more about experiences that he would like to preserve but which are not necessarily linked to his own life. However, given that the majority of Larkin's poems are written in the first person and conveyed a life not entirely dissimilar to his own, then undoubtedly readers took him at his word. Notably, this is echoed in the interviews which Larkin also included in *Required Writing*. In his interview with the *Observer* in 1979, Miriam Gross questions him: 'Tell me about your childhood. Was it really as 'unspent' as you suggest in one of your poems?' (p. 47). For Gross, the speaker of 'I Remember, I Remember' *is* Larkin. Interestingly, he does not correct her but remains considerably evasive: 'Oh I've completely forgotten it' (p. 47). Elaborating slightly, he suggests that 'perhaps it was not a very sophisticated childhood' and that 'it was all very normal' (p.47) but, ultimately, he makes no suggestion that the speaker is anyone but him. Moreover, answering Gross' follow-up question, it is Larkin who intertwines himself with the speaker of 'This be the Verse':

> I was wondering whether in the new *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* I was going to be lumbered with 'They fuck you up, your mum and dad.' I heard it on good authority that this is what they'd been told is my best-known line, and I wouldn't want it

> thought that I didn't like my parents. I did like them. But at the same time they were rather awkward people and not very good at being happy. And these things rub off. (p. 48)

This interweaving of poet and speaker is further enforced in Larkin's second interview in the edition with the *Paris Review*. After Robert Phillips asks Larkin to describe his life in Hull, Larkin responds: 'I came to Hull in 1955. After eighteen months (during which I wrote 'Mr Bleaney') I took a University flat' (p. 57). This reference to the poem hints that the speaker of the subject echoes Larkin's formative years in Hull – that he lay 'where Mr Bleaney lay' (Burnett, 2012, p. 50, line 11). Moreover, not only did Larkin hint that he was the speaker in his poetry in his interviews, but also that the protagonist of his novel *Jill* echoes his own experiences. Phillips questions Larkin: 'is the character John Kemp in any way based upon your youth? Were you that shy?' Larkin then confirms: 'I would say, yes I was and am extremely shy' (Larkin, 1983, p. 65).

Interestingly, it was not just Larkin who related the work to his life. In 1982, Anthony Thwaite could also be found guilty of opening Larkin's poetry up for biographical interpretation. *Larkin at Sixty* consists of many essays written by friends of Larkin's; Kingsley Amis, Douglas Dunn and Noel Hughes all contributed to the collection. Moreover, in his essay 'Oxford and After', Amis remarks that he 'has never known him [Larkin] to say anything he did not mean; when he tells you he feels something, you can be quite sure he does feel it' (Amis, 1982, p. 30). This is problematic in that many would take Amis' remarks as truth – and indeed many did. Now, as an example, we will explore one critic – Janice Rossen – who considers the speaker of the poetry to be Larkin himself, and who drew on Larkin's letters (before the publication of *Selected Letters*) written to childhood friend, James Sutton as further evidence that Larkin expresses his 'true' self in the poetry.

Janice Rossen, in her essay 'Difficulties with Girls' – a restatement of the argument of her monograph *Philip Larkin: His Life's Work* in 1989 – argues that 'women tend to play a role in his [Larkin's] writing which finds him not far from misogyny'. At very least, she argues that 'Larkin capitalises on the energy which derives from seeing sexual politics solely from the man's point of view, and from projecting much of his frustration onto women' (Rossen, 1997, p. 70). With this view in mind, Rossen offers an analysis of a number of poems, always presuming that the speaker of the poetry and Larkin are intertwined. She maintains that 'although Larkin wrote non-satirical poems about men's relationships with women, the underlying subtext still seems to express resentment towards women' (Rossen, 1997, p. 90). In *Philip Larkin: His Life's Work*, Rossen makes a presumptuous psychoanalytic statement: 'Larkin's fury with women is not so much a declared state of siege against them personally as it is an internal battle raging within himself' (Rossen, 1989, p. 66). She continues that his attitudes towards women are all part 'of a larger struggle with life in terms of encountering "havings-to"' (Rossen, 1989, p. 67). From the bibliography of her book, she makes reference to her archival research into Larkin's letters written to Sutton. Indeed, in one of his letters to Sutton, Larkin does brood over these 'havings-to':

> What worries me at the moment is this girl[1] I believe I mentioned […] it is rather a disturbing experience to have someone utterly dependent on you, it puts one's least thoughts and actions under a microscope (at any rate, to oneself) and short-circuits one's processes. One has no elbow room. I feel as if my wings are in danger of being clipped. And it worries me to find that I am a long way off being capable of any emotion as simple as what is called love. It seems limiting and man-eating to me. (Larkin to Sutton, 31 October 1945, Thwaite, 1992, p. 110)

While Rossen is accurate in her argument that Larkin does pout over the 'havings-to' of relationships, the letter above is not a rage against the female sex but more a frustration at losing his own independence. It is not a criticism of women but a critique of relationships

[1] Ruth Bowman

more generally. His letters to Sutton continue to brood over relationships rather than express a 'fury' against women:

> I don't know about women & marriage. One thing I do think is that if we had known as many women as we have read books by D.H.L we shd have a clearer idea of the situation. To get down to the facts of women *for oneself* I think it must be necessary to know many women – there is such a jamble of fancies & ideas about them in one's head that fly to the first one you encounter & only by experience can you test what is true & what is most valuable – but I don't see how that is to be done without being a womanizer which apart from hurting anyone's feelings, one self's included, means spending much time & money. (Larkin to Sutton, 15 September 1948, Thwaite, 1992, p. 151)

Larkin's 'fury' is more with his own lack of understanding of women than with the women themselves. The letter is more self-deprecating of his own inexperience rather than a derogatory slur against women. However, for Rossen, the personal fury towards women she discerns in Larkin's letters also creeps into his poetry: 'women tend to play a role in his writing which finds him not too far from misogyny'. She draws on Larkin's 'Sunny Prestatyn' as a case in point:

> She was slapped up one day in March.
> A couple of weeks, and her face
> Was snaggle-toothed and boss-eyed;
> Huge tits and a fissured crotch
> Were scored well in, and the space
> Between her legs held scrawls
> That set her fairly astride
> A tuberous cock and balls
>
> Autographed *Titch Thomas,* while
> Someone used a knife
> Or something to stab right through
> The moustached lips of her smile. (Burnett, 2012, pp. 64-65, lines 9-20)

Blurring the boundaries between poet and speaker, Rossen argues, 'the poet discerns a primitive sexual urge at work here' (Rossen, 1997, p. 143). By reading the voice of the poem as Larkin's own, she immediately reduces the fictionality – the speaker – in the poem. Instead, she conveys to readers that these are Larkin's own views rather than views expressed

within a fictional poem. Rossen continues to accuse the 'poet' of sharing an 'enthusiastic participation in the ritual' of defacing the poster in 'Sunny Prestatyn', and concludes that in the poem, it is *Larkin* - not the speaker – whose language suggests a 'menacing lust, and the indulging of a sexual fantasy expressed in the form of sadistic violence' (Rossen, 1997, p. 143). Moreover, Larkin 'seems to justify violence against women by suggesting that access to the woman is something men have been unfairly deprived of; therefore, she is fair game' (Rossen, 1997, p. 143). Interestingly, it is not just in 'Sunny Prestatyn' where Rossen notes the 'poet's' justification of violence: 'The lust which drives men to deface a poster can also lead one to rape an actual woman, as the poem 'Deceptions' suggest' (Rossen, 1989, p. 75). In fact, Rossen goes as far as to say that Larkin's poetry betrays his subconscious desires: 'a large part of Larkin's depiction of women has directly to do with violence against them, and he seems to speak powerfully both *for* a corporate group of men and *from* a deep subconscious level' (Rossen, 1989, p. 75). However, in the poem, 'Sunny Prestatyn' itself, there is no evidence to suggest that even the speaker, let alone Larkin himself, excuses the violent attack on the poster. In fact, the speaker is a mere observer of the defacement and there is no implication in the poem that the speaker played any role in the attack. The speaker recognises that this assault was on the female and not on the advertisement. Firstly, they note that she is sexually attacked by the graffitist before getting finished off by the violence of the knife that has permanently removed the smile on her face. Her attackers have stolen her innocence. However, Rossen refuses to separate Larkin from the speaker of the poem, or indeed separate what she considers to be Larkin's views in real life: 'The poet somehow puts the burden back on her, implying that she tempts men out of her own vanity and that she compromises the source of their deprivation' (Rossen, 1989, p. 75). She finally concludes that, 'as a siren, she drives men to commit bizarre and brutal acts in response; as a prostitute, according to this logic, she deserved the punishment anyway' (Rossen, 1989, p. 75). There is,

however, no evidence in the poem to suggest that the poet – let alone the speaker – thought that the girl deserved the punishment, nor is there any reference to prostitution. Rather, the speaker of the poem merely observes the defacement and does not make any suggestion that the woman deserved her punishment. In fact, the speaker, Larkin's fictional construct, expresses an empathy: 'she was too good for this life' (21). If there is no evidence in the poem for the 'poet's' true desires, then it would seem appropriate to pose the question: where did Rossen gather these views on Larkin?

In his letters to Sutton, which Rossen explored, Larkin does discuss his concerns about marriage and devoting his life to a woman:

> This is a long ramble & says little of merit: you say your trouble lies in not having a stable relationship with a woman. It would be a fine thing to find a woman exactly fitting one's nature, at once inspirational & goal etc. That it is possible, I rather doubt. Anyone who is in close emotional relation with me badgers and harasses me. I find no rest that way. I am always wondering if they are happy, affectionate etc., if I can do more, if I *shd* do more – or less – there's no end to it. Further, women don't just sit still & back you up. They want children: they like scenes: they want a chance of parading all the emotional haberdashery they are stocked with. Above all they like feeling like they 'own' you – or that you 'own' them – a thing I hate. (Larkin to Sutton, 26 January 1950, Thwaite, 1992, p. 158)

Undoubtedly, this letter conveys misogynistic attitudes towards women's views on marriage, children, interests and emotions. In fact, this letter could potentially be used to back up Rossen's claim that Larkin's writing finds itself not far from misogyny, and more specifically, he views 'sexual politics solely from the man's point of view, and from projecting much of his frustration onto women' (Rossen, 1997, p. 70). However, I would argue that the sentiments Larkin's letter here expresses does not suggest that Larkin was a misogynist so much as it reveals in his letters, Larkin composed fictional constructs as much as he did in his poetry. This becomes clear when we consider that the three editions of letters – *Selected Letters*, *Letters to Monica*, *Letters Home* – all depict a different version of Larkin (as this thesis will demonstrate). Returning again to Larkin's letters to Sutton, Maeve

Brennan's – who worked with Larkin and had a romantic relationship over the course of thirty years – wrote in her autobiography that she did not recognise the Larkin that was presented to Sutton:

> In the years since Philip's death, I have come to realise that neither of us [Brennan and Jones] had the true measure of his personality. But it was not until I read his letters to his school friend, Jim Sutton, that I began to have some appreciation of Larkin's extraordinary complexity and chameleon-like characteristics. In fact, I learnt a very great deal from them which had been hidden from me in his lifetime: his predilection for bad language; his self-obsession; his tight-fistedness; his contempt for the Establishment. (Brennan, 2002, p. 2)

Maeve concludes that 'as Philip had invariably presented his 'better' side to me, I had been unaware of his darker traits, or failed to recognise them' (p.4). Though Brennan's observance is only a drop in the ocean, it demonstrates how in his letters, Larkin adopted his persona to suit his reader. Therefore, Larkin's letters to *one* correspondent cannot be drawn upon as windows onto the soul of the man, or the poetry. In her disparaging attack on Larkin 'the man' (given that the 'poet' has sole focus in her criticisms), Rossen only draws upon Larkin's letters to James Sutton but uses them to determine her views on the poet. By doing so, she underplays the idea that Larkin was performing for Sutton by presenting them as fact. However, in her defence, Rossen was not to know the sheer volume of letters that Larkin had written in his lifetime and the many performances that he created. It was not until three years later that *Selected Letters* would be published, revealing a more misanthropic and misogynistic character than even Rossen had anticipated.

Following the publication of *Selected Letters*, Britain's best loved poet since World War II very quickly became a magnet for politically correct loathing. Thwaite's ground-breaking book created quite the scandal for Larkin's reputation. The content in the edition of letters unveiled a portrait of a gin-willing, racist, porn-gawping, misogynistic, misanthropic monster. To quote a few famous reviews: Peter Ackroyd labelled him a 'foul-mouthed bigot'

(Eagleton, 1993); Terry Eagleton described him as a 'death-obsessed, emotionally-retarded misanthropist who had the impudence to generalise his own fears and failings to the way things are' (Eagleton, 1993). After reading the edition, Eagleton labelled Larkin as 'racist' and 'sexist'. Lisa Jardine was especially appalled by Larkin's 'throwaway derogatory remarks about women' (Jardine, 1992, p. 2) and removed him from her university's curriculum. These views are echoed in some of the criticism that followed recently thereafter. James Booth, in his earlier monograph on Larkin, *Philip Larkin: Writer* (1992), held a different view of Larkin to the one he expressed in his later biography, *Philip Larkin: Life, Art and Love* (as we note on page 12 above and will explore further in Part II and III). In 1992, Booth's comments aligned more with Eagleton and Jardine. In his reading of Larkin's poem, 'Deceptions' – a poem alluding to Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* and dealing with the subject of rape – Booth argues that Larkin intrudes 'in the first person, upon the woman's grief, in order to offer a gauche apology on her rapist's behalf' (Booth, 1992, p. 110). For Booth, this apology can be detected in the final lines of the poem:

> Slums, years, have buried you. I would not dare
> Console you if I could. What can be said,
> Except that suffering is exact, but where
> Desire takes charge, readings grow erratic?
> For you would hardly care
> That you were less deceived, out on that bed,
> Than he was, stumbling up the breathless stair
> To burst into fulfilment's desolate attic. (Burnett, 2012, pp. 41, line 10-17)

Booth does not just leave it at an apology on behalf of the rapist, however. He takes it further than that by beginning to analyse the 'poet's' inner thoughts about the events:

> There is a deprivation in the poet's insistence that beyond the immediate sexual politics of rape, the man's also a victim. The tone is helpless and humble, suggesting that perhaps this is a more personal poem than it first seems. (Booth, 1992, p. 111)

Once again, like Rossen's reading of 'Sunny Prestatyn', Booth draws on the poet rather than recognising the speaker as a fictional construct. Thus, this reading is troubling in that there is

no apparent basis for the argument that a poem about rape would be personal to Larkin. By removing the fictional construct of the speaker, Booth offers up a reading of Larkin the man which is aligned more with the views that readers of *Selected Letters* held than which the poem itself evidences. Moreover, the poem does not portray the man as a victim in the way that it does the woman. Firstly, the semantic field of pain that Larkin creates in the opening stanza – 'bitter', 'sharp', 'scar', 'shame' and 'knives' – create a powerful image of this woman's suffering. The speaker's empathy lies with the female as he 'can taste the grief' (Burnett, 2012, pp. 41, line 1) and recognises that rape leaves a scar that is forbidden to heal (7). In the third and final stanza, the one which Booth analyses, the speaker does not portray the rapist's experience in this way. Rather, it is entirely void of the imagery of violence and pain that Larkin included earlier in the poem. Instead, the speaker poses a rhetorical question: 'where / desire takes charge, readings will go erratic?' (12-13). The speaker is highlighting the pathetic nature of such an excuse when compared with the woman's agonising experience. The speaker continues to directly address the woman, assuming that she would not care for his reasoning or his apologies. He concludes the poem by focusing on the desolation the man now feels. However, this is not because the speaker feels sympathy for him, but because when selfish desires took charge, the rapist now recognises that he committed a painful act that achieved nothing but endless suffering to the victim herself.

One year later, when Andrew Motion published his biography, *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life*, the attack on Larkin's biography continued; the terms 'racist' and 'attitudes towards women' even appeared as subject headings in the index. Interestingly, Martin Amis – son of one of Larkin's most significant correspondents Kingsley Amis – reviewed Motion's biography, recognising the impact that Larkin's letters were having on his reputation. In his review, Amis discusses the alteration in readers opinions towards Larkin following on from Motion's biography and Thwaite's *Selected Letters*. For Amis, 'the reaction against Larkin

has been unprecedentedly violent, as well as unprecedentedly hypocritical, tendentious, and smug'. Moreover, he argues that 'Its energy does not – could not – derive from literature: it derives from ideology, or from the vaguer promptings of a new ethos' (Amis, 1993). For Amis, this reaction lies with the letters rather than with the poetry itself, and, for him, the epistolary should never to be taken too seriously:

> What is a correspondence? Younger readers know what a phone message is, and what a fax is. They probably know what a letter is. But they don't know what a correspondence is. Words are not deeds. In published poems (we think first of Eliot's Jew), words edge closer to deeds. In Céline's anti-Semitic textbooks, words get as close to deeds as words can well get. Blood libels scrawled on front doors *are* deeds. In a correspondence, words are hardly even words. They are soundless cries and whispers; 'gouts of bile', as Larkin characterized his political opinions; ways of saying 'Gloomy old sod, aren't I?' or, more simply, 'Grrr.' Correspondences are self-dramatizations. Above all, a word in a letter is never your *last* word on any subject.

Amis notes a significant difference between Larkin's private personae in *some* letters and his public presentation: 'there is no public side to Larkin's prejudices, and nothing that could be construed as a racist act'. What is more revealing, is that Amis carries this through to 2011, still suggesting to his readers that Larkin's letters are not to be taken seriously. Following the release of *Selected Letters*, Martin Amis notes that his father, Kingsley, was 'effectively spurned by the letters' (Amis, 2011, p. xix), by the 'sourness' with which Larkin spoke about him to other correspondents. Amis observes that although his father was Larkin's 'most rousing correspondence', he remembers Kingsley saying about Larkin at his funeral: 'it sounds odd, but I sometimes wonder if I ever really knew him' (p. xix). Evidently, Kingsley Amis, like Maeve Brennan, recognised that the version Larkin showed to him was not exactly the version that he showed to others – and these multiple versions are nowhere more apparent than in his letters. They are not a 'hot line' to his authentic personality and feelings about key topics such as marriage and women. Rather, his letters are written by a Larkin who is as much of a fictional construct as the speaker of 'Sunny Prestatyn' and 'Deceptions'. Thus, we cannot read his poetry in the biographical way that Larkin himself encouraged, neither can

we approach the letters as biography: both letters and poems are too complex to pin down to one speaker, or one Larkin.

Despite the more recent rejections of biographical readings – John Osborne's *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence* (2008) and Gillian Steinberg's *Philip Larkin and his Audiences* (2010)[2], which wholeheartedly reject biographical readings; and Martin Amis' tirade against Motion's biography in *Poems* (2011) – in 2014, Booth continues to interchange poet and speaker in *Philip Larkin: Life, Art, and Love.* Though his study is primarily focused on a telling of the life story, Booth uses his biography as a basis to interpret the poems. In 2014, he revisits his 1992 reading of 'Deceptions' and, if anything, presents a more troubling one than the first. In his introduction, Booth asserts that 'those who shared his life simply do not recognize the Mr Nasty version' (Booth, 2014, p. 6) which sets the tone for the entire monograph. However, his reading of 'Deceptions' is interesting in that Booth's previous interpretation of the poem as personal to the 'poet', who offers a 'gauche apology' on behalf of the rapist, does not quite fit into the 'Mr Nice' version that Booth elsewhere presents. Rather than contradicting himself entirely twelve years later, in this biography Booth chooses to present Larkin's empathy with the rapist as 'an extreme metaphor for his mistreatment of Ruth [Bowman]' (p. 143). Booth writes, 'he cannot stop himself putting himself in the rapist's place'. Linking this vicious act to Larkin's selfishness towards Ruth, Booth questions his readers: 'Is he any better than this Victorian voluptuary abusing his sixteen-year-old in his quest for ultimate fulfilment?'. For Booth, the 'poet' is no longer offering an apology to the female victim in the poem, but through her, he is apologising to Ruth: 'in an indirect apology,

[2] Osborne's purpose is to dislodge biographical readings of Larkin 'from a monopoly position; or at the very least, to mount such a challenge as will oblige its defenders to rethink their position in order to retrench them' (Osborne, 2008, p. 25); For Steinberg: 'Rather than offering a linear model of Larkin's life and poems, a triangulation that includes the reader along with the life and the art, not only in the poems but as a constant presence in the prose and interviews as well, clarifies the nature of Larkin's apparent contradictions and opens the discussion of his poetry to more of its complexities' (Steinberg, 2010, p. xiv)

the poet implicitly casts his choice of art over marriage as a rape' (p. 143). The word 'implicit' has never felt more appropriate. Booth concludes his reading by justifying the apology: 'his new-found frank masculinity leads him to what some have read as an apology for the rape itself' (p. 143). This reading is located in Chapter 8 'Crisis and Escape' in Booth's biography, which details the years 1947-1950. Within these years, Larkin began to question his relationship with Ruth and expressed a desire to end it – a desire that Booth uses as a key to unlock his new reading of 'Deceptions'. Within his exploration, Booth quotes from a letter that we have already seen which reveals misogynistic attitudes: 'women don't just sit still & back you up. They want children: they like scenes […] above all they like feeling like they 'own' you – or that you 'own' them – a thing I hate (p. 139). However, this letter, which was written by Larkin on 26 January 1950 to schoolfriend James Sutton, does not mention Ruth Bowman at all. The conflict between art and marriage can be detected in a number of letters written over a year earlier. After he got engaged, Larkin wrote to Sutton to inform him of the news:

> To tell you the truth I have done something rather odd myself – got engaged to Ruth on Monday. You know I have known her since 1943 or 4; well, we have gone on seeing each other until the point seemed to arrive when we either had to start taking it seriously or drop it. I can't say I welcome the thought of marriage, as it appears to me from the safe side of it, but nor do I want to desert the only girl I have met who doesn't instantly frighten me away. (Larkin to Sutton, 18 May 1948, Thwaite, 1992, p. 147).

A few months later, Larkin informs his friend that the engagement has been called off: 'I'm not cheerful either. I have given up on my novel & Ruth has given up on me, not seeing any future in it. Nor do I!' (Larkin to Sutton, 24 March 1949, p.152). A sense of guilt does pervade the letter: 'Therefore I am living a disagreeable life at this remnant of a home, with a general sense of being buggered up, & a generally despicable character'. An outcry of self-loathing continues:

> My great trouble is, as usual, that I lack desires. Life is to know what you want, & to go get it. But I don't desire anything. I am unconvinced of the worth of literature. I don't want money or position. I find it easier to abstain from women than sustain the trouble of them & the creakings of my own monastic personality.

If one had a tendency, like Booth, to read 'Deceptions' as a metaphorical apology to Ruth, then this letter of 24 March 1949 would seem more appropriate as a key to unlock Booth's biographical reading than the one from January 1950 that Booth chose to preface his reading with. It demonstrates a feeling of guilt and remorse for how the relationship ended and his struggle with art itself. However, as we know already from Brennan's reading of the letters to Sutton – Larkin presented himself very differently to different correspondents and different audiences. Moreover, in James Underwood's study 'Philip Larkin's Textual Identities', he argues 'what was between himself and Sutton, what brought their two distinct selves together, was art' (Underwood, 2015, p. 55). In his insightful reading of the Larkin-Sutton correspondence, Underwood astutely observes that their letters predominantly focused on literature itself: the act of writing; reading; discussion of authors. For Underwood, these letters present a version of Larkin as 'The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man' (p.54). Given this performance, then, it is no wonder Larkin contemplated art and marriage in his letters to Sutton. However, they were exactly that: a performance. Now, that is not to say that Larkin was not genuine in expressing his conflicting views on art and marriage. However, what I argue instead is that we cannot draw on Larkin's letters to Sutton as evidence for Larkins views on the end of his and Bowman's engagement, given their performative status. Furthermore, certainly we cannot draw on the letters for our interpretation of a poem such as 'Deceptions' without any textual indication in the poem inviting us to do this. Finally, we cannot base what we know about Larkin's relationship to Bowman based on his letters to another correspondent – especially when no edition since and including *Selected Letters* contain any of the letters that Larkin wrote to Ruth herself.

This study questions our use of Larkin's letters as a key to unlock the poetry (or other writings). It does so, not because I reject biographical readings entirely – *I don't* – but because I reject the reliability of Larkin's letters as biography. As this section has demonstrated, Larkin letters are continuously drawn upon – consciously and unconsciously – to interpret the literary texts, yet the letters themselves have proven to be as complex as the poems explored here. Therefore, the remainder of this introduction will turn away from biographical readings and introduce the letters as fiction. The originality of my position lies in the fact that the letters will not be employed to demonstrate contradictions and untrustworthiness in his literary texts but rather the paradoxical and unreliable nature of the letters themselves. Thus, the letters will be presented as fictional constructs warranting as much literary interpretation as the poetry, prose and short stories. As a starting point, the most obvious place to turn is to Larkin's awareness of his public persona and the posthumous reader – as a baseline for his literary performance in the letters – before progressing to the more obscure imaginative worlds he created.

Larkin, Letters and his Posterity

Whilst Larkin's reflections on his own posterity are not a dominant focus of this study, it is worth noting its influence over the material in Larkin's oeuvre that we deem 'biographical'. Moreover, given that in his interviews Larkin encouraged us to link his personal with his poetry, it is important to consider which parts of his life Larkin was suggesting posterity should read in relation to his poetry. By this I mean, the steps Larkin took in preparation for his death – what he planned to keep, to destroy – how his story should be told. The following section considers the posterity of writers more generally, turning to Larkin's own understanding of the posthumous reputations of authors who came before him, and finally the steps he *attempts* to take to secure his own reputation.

To begin with, it is worth mentioning that when reviewing the letters of Thomas Hardy – another author who is often read biographically – Larkin observed that 'in recent years we have awoken to the fact that Hardy's life, and for that matter his letters, may not be entirely what they seem' (Thwaite, 2001, p.255). He concludes that 'the fact is that much of what we know of Hardy is simply what he chose we should know' (pp.255-6). Interestingly, then, in Motion's introduction to his biography *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life*, is a recollection of Larkin's plans for posterity and how he hoped for a similar outcome to Hardy: 'When I see the Grim Reaper coming up the path to my front door', he said to Motion in 1983, 'I'm going to the bottom of the garden, like Thomas Hardy, and I'll have a bonfire of all the things I don't want anyone to see' (Motion, 1993, p. xv). Larkin never made it to the bottom of the garden. Perhaps what he would have burned was the various presentations that can be found in his letters leaving us with one that aligns with the Larkin in the interviews – the one who encouraged biographical readings of Larkin's poems. I doubt Larkin would have left readers with the readings of the early nineties. Nevertheless, whether or not Larkin ever intended to burn his letters, he certainly did make plans for his posterity, and this is an important factor when considering his letters as an unveiling of his authentic self. Needless to say, Larkin was not the only author to consider this.

In her will, Vernon Lee instructed that there must be a 'fifty-year limitation' (Millgate, 1992, p. 169) on the viewing of her personal documents: inclusive of her private letters. As she died in 1935, the letters should have been embargoed until 1985. However, Irene Cooper Willis, the executor of her will, defied this declaration by publishing a cache of Lee's letters in 1937. Cooper Willis presents her defence: '1980 is a long time ahead, and as letters are not likely to interest posterity half as much as they will interest those who knew Vernon Lee personally, I decided to have a small number of copies of them printed privately' (Millgate, 1992, p. 169). However, given that Lee directed a restriction upon their release, it is perfectly

plausible to assume that it was precisely those who 'knew Vernon Lee personally' that she wanted to shield from exposure to the letters. Whilst there is logic in Cooper Willis' defence, it is not necessarily the case: those who know authors personally may be interested to see these documents, but that does not negate the possibility of Lee scholarship drawing on them for years to come. In fact, letters and tell-all biographies were then, and still are, commonplace and an established part of literary studies.

Before Lee's time, Alfred Lord Tennyson stated that he deplored the study of biography. Discussing the rise in posthumous biography during the Victorian Era, he contemptuously observes, 'the desiring of anecdotes and acquaintances with the lives of great men was treating them like pigs to be ripped open' (Lee, 2015, p. 19). For Tennyson, once the search for the man beneath the art begins, the author is no longer viewed as a human being but degraded to animals as all their vulnerabilities are exposed. This is echoed in his poem 'To – After Reading a Life and Letters', in which Tennyson understands that by exposing their private thoughts and feelings,

> The Poet cannot die,
> Nor leave his music as of old,
> But round him, ere he scarce be cold,
> Begins the scandal and the cry:
>
> "Proclaim the faults he would not show;
> Break lock and seal; betray the trust;
> Keep nothing sacred; 'tis but just
> The many-headed beasts should know" (Tennyson, 1849, lines 13-20).

The speaker recognises that once the poet dies, he will never be at peace. Rather, the humiliation is only beginning – secrets that ought to be kept become revealed; documents that should be sealed are opened; private lives are unveiled for predatory eyes. Tennyson, then, took matters into his own hands, ensuring he would have influence over his own reputation as man and writer. He carefully selected his own son, Hallam, as his biographer (a noteworthy

choice given the conventional notion that family know us best), and meticulously deciphered between what to seal and reveal. For Michael Millgate, Hallam's *Memoir* on Tennyson is 'at once the most indispensable of biographical documents and the least to be trusted, a barrier that must, yet cannot, be overcome' (Millgate, 1992, p. 54). Whilst *Memoir* will reveal some interesting aspects of Tennyson's biography, it cannot be treated as truly authentic, given Tennyson's own influence over the material chosen. As Hermione Lee warns: 'the biographer must ask how the subject has remembered, and shaped, their own life-story'. She encourages biographers to look, 'not just for the information they provide, but for what they do and don't say, and how they choose to say it' (Lee, 2015, p. 21).

What an author chooses to include in their biography or editions of letters, or indeed *who* they select to publish these posthumously are of equal importance, however – the first because we recognise that there will certainly be material deliberately left out or retold in light of the author's preference; the second because those who posthumously publish biographical material about an author do so with their own version of that person in mind. The subjectivity Hallam's *Memoir* is twofold in that Hallam has been influenced by Tennyson in the selection of material, but he also offers a subjective, family perspective – Hallam plays the role of the first-person narrator for his father, rather than an objective, dispassionate commentator. Therefore, as Millgate suggests, the text is both insightful yet untrustworthy.

In his study, *Testamentary Acts*, Michael Millgate also explores the posthumous reputations of Robert Browning, Henry James and Thomas Hardy. He documents how each writer assumed control over their own posthumous reputations, attempting to delimit their public presentation: by commissioning of authorised biographies and memoirs; by destroying unpublished juvenilia; and by burning diaries and letters. For example, *The Life of Thomas Hardy*, which was published by Hardy's wife Florence, was dramatically influenced by

Hardy himself. In fact, it was almost entirely written by Hardy. For Millgate, this is 'the most radical of Hardy's techniques for self-projection into a future beyond the moment of his death, and it was extremely successful, at least in the short run' (Millgate, 1992, p. 164). Like Tennyson, Hardy wanted to influence his posthumous reputation; not only did he write his own biography, but he also ensured that many private documents remained private.

As we know, Larkin was aware of Hardy's attempts to hide beneath the shadows he chose to cast. In his essay, 'The Hidden Hardy', Larkin informs his readers that 'photographs were burnt'; 'old poems rewritten and the originals scrapped'; and that after he died his wife continued to destroy what remained:

> Basketsful of papers, letters and documents were fed into a bonfire, and she herself raked the ashes. Whatever survives is unlikely to have done so by chance […] thereby what he wished to be remembered would be remembered; what he wishes forgotten would be forgotten. (Thwaite, 2001, pp. 255-6)

Larkin, as both Hardy admirer and librarian, was well aware of the role biography plays in literary studies. In his final collection, *High Windows*, the poem 'Posterity' dramatizes the reality of the life of a biographer: 'Jake Balokowsky, my biographer, / Has this page microfilmed' (Burnett, 2012, pp. 86, lines 1-2) The speaker, Balokowsky, uses self-deprecating humour as he envisages the monotonous task of retelling the story of the poet's life:

> 'I'm stuck with this old fart at least a year;
>
> I wanted to teach school in Tel Aviv,
> But Myra's folks' – he makes the money sign –
> 'Insisted I got tenure.' (6-9)

However, the poem demonstrates a different reality for biographical writing to Tennyson's attempt to assume overall control of his posthumous reputation. Larkin's reality recognises the demand for biographical publications – despite whether or not they are particularly

interesting – and the pressures on biographers to sell books. Thus, this is where biographical writing can become problematic, in that often the eye-catching material can do more harm than good for the subject – as seen in *Selected Letters*.

Larkin's preoccupations with posterity are best demonstrated through his critical essays, however. Exploring the biography of T.S Eliot, he acknowledges that although Eliot did not want a biography to be written – and went to significant lengths to prevent it – Peter Ackroyd was still able to write an informative one piecing together aspects of his life (albeit with minimal help from Eliot's estate). Therefore, Larkin proclaims, 'truly it is not much use trying to put people off' (Larkin, 1983, p. 359), accepting that inevitably the life will be explored. However, in his exploration of Wilfred Owen's biographical reputation, Larkin discusses that despite the inevitability of it, there are complications: 'a writer's reputation is twofold: what we think of the work, and what we think of him', and 'we expect the two halves to relate: if they don't, then one or other of our opinions alter until they do' (Larkin, 1983, p. 228) – an ongoing alteration that he himself has been subject to since 1992.

As Larkin was a librarian throughout his adult life, he undoubtedly specialised in storing, documenting, and archiving literary and biographical material – and he carried this professional practice into his personal life. He documented the details of the everyday in his diaries, he methodically stored all incoming letters in shoe boxes, and he archived his work notebooks. As Ian Hamilton observes: 'Larkin specialised in collecting modern literary transcripts and he meticulously hoarded his own memorabilia'. As a rationale, Hamilton suggests that 'from an early age, it seems, he knew himself to be marked for literary greatness' (Hamilton, 1992, p. 306). Interestingly, Jonathan Ellis presents a similar argument. For Ellis, however, Larkin's awareness of his own reputation only becomes clear when he starts writing his letters in the third person – employing phrases such as 'a Larkin afternoon' and a 'discovery in Larkin studies' (Ellis, 2015, p. 13). However, it is not just in Larkin's

documentation of these letters, or indeed, when he refers to himself in the third person, that we see Larkin's preparedness for posterity. His later letters also demonstrate that Larkin not only had his individual reader in mind, but his posthumous reader too.

In 1981, Anthony Thwaite was commissioned to write a short critical study on Larkin. However, the task was never completed. Interestingly, given that Larkin always presented himself as a private man – declining several interviews and rarely indulging in public readings – Larkin's letter to Thwaite regarding Thwaite's decision to discontinue the study surprisingly airs an element of disappointment: 'naturally I'd have liked to see what you said – if your views changed over the years – but if they haven't then I can't imagine anything more drearier (from your point of view) than saying it all again'. He concludes: 'vanity would have liked the book, but vanity can shut up' (Thwaite, 1992, p. 658). This may have prompted Thwaite to go on to publish *Larkin at Sixty* the following year.

In preparation for the *Larkin at Sixty* collection, Larkin assumed control over the stories told and how they would be presented. After reading the first draft of childhood friend Noel Hughes' essay on 'The Young Mr Larkin', Larkin complains to Thwaite:

> I don't think my opinion of Hughes's piece is substantially changed by reading it again, e.g. (para 1) Larkin pretends he was disrespectful, but was really a creep; (para. 6-9) Larkin pretends he was unhappy at school and unsuccessful, but was really a big strong chap who won lots of prizes, one of them undeservedly, and of course a creep. And so it goes on. Both Hughes and I have spent a lifetime with words, and I find it incredible that he be unaware of the effect he is producing, or that I should mistake an effect that is in fact not present. And where is all this friendliness he speaks of? Damn me if I can see any. (Thwaite, 1992, p. 622)

Larkin complains that Hughes has got him 'wrong'. What's more, on a closer reading, Hughes's essay seems to contradict the public persona that Larkin curates during his interviews: Larkin publicly proclaims that his childhood was unspent, yet Hughes documents a happy school life; Larkin maintains he was not always a successful writer, but Hughes

informs readers that Larkin's talents were widely recognised. Larkin was evidently concerned that Hughes' essay would contradict his public image.

Larkin was not only concerned with contradictions but also with public perception once the sealed became revealed:

> I'm sure you can understand how uneasy I feel about this compilation of Anthony's. When I reluctantly asserted to it I was under the impression it was going to be literary criticism. Now I find all my old pals are recalling the number of times I puked down the stairs at Oxford, and reciting the worst of my limericks ('There was a young man of Bell Green'). I shall emerge as a kind of grey area Dylan Thomas. Worse still, it will unleash the hordes of contemptuous swine to whom I am a vile old man to be beaten and kicked and insulted. (Thwaite, 1992, p. 640)

Demonstrating fear for misinterpretation and misunderstanding, Larkin is like any author, with Tennyson and Hardy. It is difficult for a writer to not want *some* influence over their reputation, and unlikely that they will not warrant it. However, as readers we must be aware of this when tackling any biographical information. More specifically, if in his letters to Thwaite, Larkin is demonstrating a fear of the public eye, then it is likely that this fear was transferred across to his private letters - particularly the later letters. Aware that he, too, would be 'ripped open like a pig', to quote Tennyson, Larkin knew the likelihood that his private correspondences would be released into the public world. Though he planned to burn everything, he knew the risks if he was unable to. Therefore, it is certainly plausible that Larkin's later letters not only demonstrate a more mature character, but also one who had more than one reader in mind with every letter.

Though posterity certainly plays a role in how Larkin presented himself in letters, it is certainly not the biggest factor. Rather, for Larkin, it was his immediate, intended readers who played the most significant role in shaping Larkin's persona. They enabled him to escape reality and present a fictitious version of himself – as all epistolary writing has the potential to do. Therefore, the following section explores more closely the possibilities the

letter presents to any writer; the recognition that letters are not waves of biography, but rather currents that move readers in and out of a reality beyond their control.

Larkin, Letters and the Epistolary.

Letters, if they survive, have conventionally been considered the most important source of evidence as to the nature and temperament of the subject of a biography. However, unlike, say diaries, or notebooks, which tend to be private, contemplative discourses, letters reflect the ways in which an individual presents themselves to others. They enable us to examine how different correspondents prompt letter writers to modify and adjust their sense of themselves, or how they wish to appear. In literary biographies, letters are particularly significant because they enable us to compare the writer in communication (often intimate communication) with others with the image of the writer we form from the literary work: their public, aesthetic persona. They allow us to see how the image projected in their letters compares with the perception of them formed from their writing.

Reviewing Dorothy Osborne's letters, Virginia Woolf recognised the potential for creativity behind the epistolary form:

> Had she been born in 1827, Dorothy Osborne would have written novels; had she been born in 1527, she would never have written at all. But she was born in 1627, and at that date though writing books was ridiculous for a woman there was nothing unseemly in writing a letter. And so by degrees the silence is broken; we begin to hear rustlings in the undergrowth; for the first time in English Literature we hear men and women talking together over the fire. (Woolf, 1992, p. 127)

She continues to describe the letter as 'an art that could be carried out in odd moments'; 'a pageant which unfolds itself page by page' thus leading us to 'come by a form of literature, if Dorothy will let us call it so' (Woolf, 1992, pp. 127-129). However, whilst Woolf does recognise the fictionality of letters, she does not exclude biography entirely from her reading: her review assumes that, in her letters, Osborne is 'herself with little effort or emphasis', and

that the letters 'flow of her own personality' (Woolf, 1992, p. 129). For Woolf, letters can be both at the same time – not entirely biographical nor entirely fictional.

Hermione Lee explores the dangers of trusting the letter: 'letters are performative; but most of us behave differently with different people, and those differences and contradictions make up who we are'. She continues to argue that, 'letters, even written on the same day, may very well lie or contradict each other', especially if the writer has 'a marked tendency to say one thing to one person and another thing to another person' (Lee, 2015, p. 20). Jonathan Ellis takes Lee's point further; arguing, not only that we are all different dependent on who we are talking to, as Lee does, but that 'all letter writers put on a show most of the time, regardless of whether they are aware of it or not'. Moreover, Ellis continues, letter writers all 'certainly employ conventions and techniques to make something essentially false (language) seem true'. He concludes that 'none are free of the temptations of fakery and invention' (Ellis, 2015, p. 10). When we read the private letters of an author – say their intimate correspondence with a spouse, lover, friend, or relative – we assume that we are getting to know the one holding the pen. However, that is not entirely true. When we read autobiographies, we are generally more aware of the author's intentions: what is included is chosen for the reader to remember; what is left out is a deliberate act to be forgotten or never revealed. Letters are no different: when we write a letter, we are telling a one-sided story, a partial version of events, and never the entire truth. What is more, as letters, unlike autobiographies, are usually addressed to only one correspondent, the letter writer can adopt their epistolary persona to suit that reader. Furthermore, Hugh Haughton notes that 'when we get a letter, we speak of 'hearing from someone', as if the letter were a projection of the writer's voice' (Haughton, 2015, p. 59). In fact, as this thesis will argue, Larkin's letters are not just an opportunity to hear a projection of the Larkin's biographical voice, but of his several fictionalised voices, shaped according to the expectations of each letter's intended

recipient. Larkin's letters therefore stand midway 'between the work of art and biography' (Haughton, 2015, p. 57).

From an early age, Larkin expressed himself with profound literary and self-awareness. Under the influence of his father, Sydney Larkin, he was introduced to a breadth of literature stemming from the classics to the more modern D.H. Lawrence. Larkin's childhood friend, Noel Hughes, comments that, 'there is in Philip much that is reminiscent of his father. I am sure that Sydney would have directed his early reading'. Larkin's father, Hughes continues, 'must have contributed to that superb mastery of language that has characterised all Philip's verse' (Hughes, 1982, p. 21). This mastery of language is evident in his correspondences. Larkin had a remarkable tendency to change his performance, meticulously modifying characters dependent on who he was writing to. Reviewing the first edition of Thwaite's *Selected Letters,* Anthony Cronin recognises that 'Larkin in his correspondence is a comic turn, or rather several comic turns, sedulously putting on different personae for different recipients' (Thwaite, 1992, bookcover). Cronin is not the only critic to recognise the multitude of personae: Richard Bradford argues that Larkin 'played different roles for different people' and queries whether or not we can 'claim to know the real Philip Larkin' (Bradford, 2005, p. 16)? From a quick scan of Larkin's primary correspondents, we can identify the multiple roles and personae that Larkin adopts when discussing his mother:

> I suppose I shall become free of mother at 60, three years before the cancer starts. What a bloody, sodding awful life. (Bennett, 1993, p. 227)
>
> No letter! Are you all right? […] Please reassure me. (Larkin to Eva, 24 October 1952, Booth, 2018, p. 212)
>
> Mother doesn't speak of any more falls, but she does say that someone tied her to a chair yesterday, wch. is rather disagreeable. Showed me the string. No doubt it was all done with the best intentions, just to remind her she wasn't supposed to walk unaided, but I didn't like it […] It leaves me feeling *very* wretched as you know. I can't imagine how it will go on. (Larkin to Brennan, 26 March 1972, Brennan, 2002, p. 55)

To Jones he is the irritated son; to Brennan and Eva he is the devoted son. We can also identify this playing of roles in Larkin's attitudes about and towards women:

> Don't you think it's ABSOLUTELY SHAMEFUL that men have to pay for women without BEING ALLOWED TO SHAG the woman afterwards AS A MATTER OF COURSE? I do: simply DISGUSTING. It makes me ANGRY. Everything about the ree-lay-shun-ship between men and women makes me angry. It's all a fucking balls up. (Larkin to Amis, n.d., 1946, Motion, 1993, p. 143).

> It has meant a great deal to me to have your sympathetic letters. I don't connect them with my flirting or taking advantage of you… Or any other cliché of human relations: they were just one person showing kindness to and concern for another. And this is a jolly rare thing in my experience. Thank you, dear, thank you with all my heart. (Larkin to Brennan, 18 April 1961, Brennan, 2002, p. 42)

Margaretta Jolly and Liz Stanley argue that it is 'not to say that letters are deliberate lies' but that we ought to be careful when categorising them as 'spontaneous outpourings of the true self' (Jolly and Stanley, 2005, p. 93). Larkin corresponded with a wide range of people, including lovers, family, friends, publishers, contemporaries, colleagues and fans of his work. Writing to his long-term companion and lover, Monica Jones, in 1951, Larkin muses over how he presents himself through the epistolary:

> From past experiences I have found that my remarks about myself are not very trustworthy: they are invariably designed to conceal rather than reveal, and are based a good deal on the impulses of the moment and escape states of mind by transcribing them. They are only true as symptoms and not as literal statements. (Larkin to Jones, 1 June 1951, Hull History Centre Ref: U DX 341/3)

This unpublished letter indicates more clearly than any other Larkin's awareness of the complex motivations that underlie forms of expression, in the poetry as well as the letters, which may otherwise come across as straightforwardly biographical. Moreover, both in this letter and in Larkin's novels, Larkin is suggesting to his reader that the epistolary form is more performative than biographical. During Larkin's interview with the *Paris Review*, Robert Phillips asks: 'letters are an important and integral part of both novels [*Jill* and *A Girl in Winter*], as plot and as texture. Are you a voluminous letter writer?' (Larkin, 1983, p. 64). Evasively, Larkin responds:

> I suppose I used to write many more letters than I do now, but so did everyone. Nowadays I keep up with one or two people, in the sense of writing when there isn't anything special to say. I love *getting* letters, which means you have to answer them, and there isn't always time. I had a very amusing and undemanding correspondence with the novelist Barbara Pym, who died in 1980, that arose simply out of a fan letter I wrote her and went on for over ten years before we actually met'. (Larkin, 1983, pp. 64-5)

It is fascinating that he chose to mention his correspondence with Pym in particular, fascinating in that for over ten years this was purely an epistolary relationship – they had never met face-to-face, never heard each other's voice; they only knew the version that was presented on paper. Both Larkin and Pym (who are both authors) had the opportunity to invent, reinvent, create and adapt the persona they wanted to unveil to the other. Perhaps by mentioning their correspondence in response to the question, Larkin is giving readers a key to unlocking the novel: His response about his epistolary relationship with Pym echoes the predominant theme of his second novel, *A Girl in Winter*. Katherine, the protagonist of the novel, develops a relationship with Robin through letter writing. However, their epistolary relationship does not carry through to reality as both correspondents were quite different in person to their paper presentation. This plot emphasises the possibilities that the letter has to offer, as Robin's sister Jane elucidates:

> I was interested when Robin started writing to you […] I think it would be fascinating to write to somebody who didn't know you, who'd never seen you even, and who didn't live in the same country. You could tell them anything, and it wouldn't matter: you could make out you were all sorts of things you weren't, and they wouldn't know any different. Or you could tell them the truth, and see how they took it. (Larkin, 1947, p. 148)

Each of the editions of Larkin's letters – *Selected Letters*, *Letters to Monica*, and *Letters Home* – all reveal three very different versions of Larkin – they present, as Jane notes, 'all sorts' of Larkins, leaving it impossible to interpret which one is the real Larkin.

Jolly and Stanley offer one solution: when reading letters, we need to identify 'the subtle interchange between fantasy, writing and relationship' (Jolly and Stanley, 2005, p. 93). Rather than searching for the real Philip Larkin, we should be reading Larkin's letters as a portal between fantasy and reality – between the fictional worlds he creates for his recipients and the real world. Larkin began creating these fictional worlds from the very beginning of his letter writing, and indeed his literary writing – one of the most notable being the creation of the Brunette Coleman world: the threshold to the fictional realm.

Larkin, Letters and Fictionality.

Following the publication of Thwaite's *Selected Letters* and *A Writer's Life,* Larkin's poetry was often read in the light of his supposed perverted inclinations. As with his poetry, Larkin's short stories, *Trouble at Willow Gables* and *Michaelmas Term at St Brides*, have since been read as windows onto Larkin's soul – a soul which, like the soul readers discern in the poetry, unveils for many a misogynistic and misanthropic man.

In his biography, Andrew Motion presents the short stories as narratives that developed from 'obscene and soft porn fairy stories' which Larkin wrote with college friend, Kingsley Amis (Motion, 1993, p. 46). Motion notes that when Larkin began writing Brunette Coleman's stories independently, he was able to write more fluently and the 'porn' element was 'slight' (Motion, 1993, p. 46). He avers that when analysing the two short stories, 'it would be easy to sound too serious. The novels are essentially – frivolous things, done for private pleasure and with very limited aims' (Motion, 1993, p. 89). Although Motion momentarily describes them as almost meaningless, he notes a hidden biographical aim: 'by turns comic and silly, they allow us to see some aspects of Larkin's mind that he normally kept hidden, and others he didn't know existed'. For Motion, 'Brunette Coleman was a disguise, an amusing mask, but nevertheless also an unwitting means of self-revelation'

(Motion, 1993, p. 89). Once again, we return to a biographical reading of Larkin's fictional works.

Motion prefaces his discussion of the short stories with a letter written by Larkin for Amis at the time of Coleman's construction: 'homosexuality has been completely replaced by lesbianism in my character at the moment – I don't know why' (Motion, 1993, p. 86). A dialogue drawing on lesbianism was not unusual in Larkin and Amis's correspondence (as we will see in Part I); in fact, their epistolary world was predominantly dominated by school-girls, women and lesbians. After the publication of the Larkin-Amis correspondence in *Selected Letters*, it is unsurprising that readers should have perceived the Brunette Coleman fictions as longer versions of the Larkin-Amis letters. The short stories themselves have indeed remained controversial in that critics read them as pornography. Julian Lovelock, in his monograph *From Morality to Mayhem*, describes Larkin's first short story, *Trouble at Willow Gables,* as 'disturbing and bordering on the pornographic' (Lovelock, 2018, pp. 107-16). Moreover, within his reading he identifies that the story 'also has a darker side and foreshadows the cruel streak in much of Larkin's poetry' (Lovelock, 2018, pp. 107-16), as he argues the focus is predominantly on beatings, undressings and stealing. Lovelock links the Coleman story to Larkin's future poetry through the theme of cruelty. However, I would argue that the Coleman writings *do* link to the late poetry but only insofar as they both present a yearning to leave reality (as we shall see shortly). However, this is not the first time that Brunette Coleman has been subjected to accusations of cruelty, the original hint of the latent cruelty within these stories was documented in Motion's biography: 'Brunette is under no illusions about the psychological motivations [sado-masochism] here, and in naming them Larkin identifies the feelings about women which lie at the heart of the novel, and of its real author.' Motion concludes by elucidating what he feels the predominant feeling was: '"Lust" we are told, "had turned into anger, and anger intro cruelty, and now cruelty, partly sated and

partly still hungry, was turning into lust again"' (Motion, 1993, p. 92). Once again, we identify a reading of a fictionalised speaker – in this case Brunette Coleman – and relate it to the 'real author': Philip Larkin.

Eschewing the biographical speculations put forward by Motion and others, this thesis argues that as critics we should not be removing Larkin's fictional masks, like Brunette Coleman, to reveal Larkin 'the man'. By doing so, Motion is disregarding the fictional world constructed by Larkin, with harmful repercussions – harmful not only to his biographical reputation but to his literary one also. By reading Brunette Coleman as a biographical mask, rather than a fictional persona, we overlook Larkin's ability to manipulate personae and his readiness to plunge his reader in and out of the fictitious worlds he creates through the *character* of Brunette Coleman – or whichever character he chooses to be when he puts pen to paper.

In his biography, Richard Bradford offers an alternative perspective for reading the short stories to that offered by Motion or Lovelock: 'it would be tempting to treat the two novels […] as a blend of mild pornography and self-parody: women's sexuality, specifically lesbianism, appears to be the predominant theme' (Bradford, 2005, p. 51). However, Bradford concludes that 'on closer scrutiny it becomes evident that he [Larkin] had involved himself in something far more strategic and complex than an exercise in vicarious gratification' (Bradford, 2005, p. 51). For Bradford, the Brunette Coleman oeuvre is an achievement: an achievement because Larkin 'maintains throughout an authentic image of a particular woman adapting her own presence of mind' (52). Rather than reading them as a mask or disguise that allowed Larkin to reveal his inner self, Bradford acknowledges Larkin's ability to create a caricature for multiple purposes. Larkin created Coleman as a prose writer, a poet, a critic and an auto-biographer. For each of these roles, as Bradford notes, Larkin manages to create an authentic fictionalised writer:

> She enabled him [i.e. Larkin] to invent a writer, to stand outside this presence, sometimes allying her with his own inclinations – sexual and familial – and sometimes watching her operate as a figure attempting to reconcile what she was with what she put on the page. (Bradford, 2005, p. 54)

Coleman certainly aided Larkin to stand outside this presence – and he carried this through to his novels, his poetry and his letters. Larkin's writings: they all deal with a conflict between the fictional and real worlds. For example, in 'Ignorance' the speaker ponders: 'strange to know nothing, never to be sure / Of what is true or right or real' (Burnett, 2012, pp. 67, lines 1-2). In 'Home is so Sad', the speaker returns to his childhood home, only to be reminded that reality never lived up to his dreams: 'turn again to what it started as, / A joyous shot at how things ought to be, / long fallen wide' (p.54-55, lines 6-8). 'Talking in Bed' also demonstrates a clear dissatisfaction with reality: 'Talking in bed ought to be the easiest' (p.61, line 1). However, this is not the case as 'more and more time passes silently' (4). In 'Here', the speaker longs to be in a place outside his reality: 'here, there is unfenced existence: / facing the sun, untalkative, out of reach' (p.49, lines 31-32). Finally, in 'Mr Bleaney', the speaker fictionalises the life of Mr Bleaney – imagining what his time was like: 'stub my fags / On the same saucer-souvenir' (p.50, lines 11-12) – to make the speaker's own life more bearable. Furthermore, as we will see in Part I, in *Jill* Larkin's protagonist, John Kemp, creates an imaginary sister, Jill, to impress his roommate, only to meet his idealised version in the flesh and find that she, inevitably, does not quite live up to his imaginings. Part II explores in *A Girl in Winter*, the epistolary relationship between Katherine and Robin and their subsequent disappointment when meeting in reality and finding that each does not live up to the imagined versions of the other. In Part II we will also explore how Larkin's letters to Jones blend incessant apologies for the anti-climaxes of their actual encounters with articulations of Larkin's desire to return to the fictionalised world of Rabbit and Seal. The letters to his mother explored in Part III inhabit the land of the Creature. In the creation of

Brunette Coleman, it is no different: Larkin is exploring the theme of the fictional world versus the real one. In these seemingly 'frivolous texts', we identify a dynamic between the real and imagined world, with Brunette as an interface between Larkin and an imagined reality.

Both Motion and Bradford note that Larkin pretended the Brunette Coleman writings were a joke to his friends. When discussing Coleman with Kingsley Amis, Larkin speaks as though Brunette were a real person: 'I enclose a ballad Brunette Coleman wrote the other day' (Larkin to Amis, 25 August 1943, Thwaite, 1992, p. 65); 'Brunette is very thrilled with it and thinks it's the best thing she has done. She is sulky at the moment because I told her 'the gentle sex' was showing this week, and now she finds it isn't' (Larkin to Amis, 1 September 1943, p. 66); 'Brunette is working on a little monograph about girls' school stories, which I will tell you more about next week' (Larkin to Amis, 19 October 1943, p. 80). These letters do present a humorous tone – as Bradford and Motion note. Moreover, this tone is also evident in *Selected Letters*. In fact, Larkin's nom de plume is referenced a total of eight times in the entire letter edition and, on each occasion, Larkin was writing to Kingsley Amis. It is unsurprising, then, that critics have viewed the Coleman stories as pornography given that Larkin is hinting to Amis that this is precisely how we should interpret them: 'I am glad you liked Brunette's poems: I think all wrong-thinking people ought to like them. I used to write them whenever I'd seen some particularly ripe schoolgirl, or when I was feeling sentimental' (Larkin to Amis, 16 September 1943, Thwaite, 1992, p. 70). The phrase choice 'wrong-thinking people' undoubtedly suggests to readers that the Coleman poems include a perverse undertone. Indeed, the poem that Larkin is referring to in his correspondence is 'Femmes Damnees' – a poem which explores a lesbian sexual encounter. However, it is not so much the content of the poem that interests us here, but the content of the letter and the addressee. The tone of this letter echoes that of all the Larkin-Amis correspondence: as we will see in

more detail in Part I of this thesis, Larkin performs masculinity to excess and plays the bravado role for Amis. In addition, as we will see shortly, the stories themselves demonstrate less pornography than they do an escapism from the real world – confirming Larkin's performance for Amis. These letters exemplify the extent to which Larkin creates Brunette as a fictional character separate from himself. By this I mean that Brunette Coleman was herself a fictional character, a construct of Larkin's – not just a mask that he hid beneath. Brunette Coleman, in other words, was another tremendous mixture of truth and fiction.

In his biography, *Life, Art, and Love,* Booth assumes a correlation between Brunette's story and Larkin's own life story. In the footnotes, he decodes aspects of the Coleman stories by supplying his readers with information about Larkin's life: Writing of *Trouble at the Willow Gables* Booth argues that 'alternatively Larkin simply placed himself in Marie's position, and is thinking of St John's' (Booth, 2014, p. 141); in relation to his discussion on the character Diana in *Michaelmas Term at St Brides* Booth quotes Larkin: 'Diana Gollancz has moved into Beaumont buildings, but right at the other end of the cul-de sac' (Larkin to Sutton, 25 May 1943, cited in Booth, 2002, p. 212); 'Penelope Scott-Stoke, a girl resembling an Eton boy and whom I had been gently attracted to' (cited in Booth, p. 187). Though there may be links to Larkin's life, it is difficult to discern the who the real Larkin is in Coleman's story, given he also lurks in *Michaelmas Term at St Brides* as the 'Creature' (Booth, 2002, p. 166; 230) – the same name he uses in his epistolary relationship with his mother. If Larkin's 'creature', appears in his short story, it makes a biographical reading more complex given that he inhabits multiple identities in the story – is Larkin Coleman or is he Creature? Hilary Allen, who is one of the central characters in *Michaelmas Term at St Bride's* has been interacting with a man with whom she had been beaten at table tennis. Hilary says that she had little interest in him, and that he 'had become known among Hilary's friends as 'The Creature' (p. 166). Booth adds a footnote of explanation: 'Philip Brown recalled that Larkin

was beaten at table-tennis by Hilary Allen from St. Hilda's' (p.166). For Booth, Larkin lurks beneath Brunette and the Creature, because both contain biographical details aligned with Larkin's life. However, the obvious conclusion of this – which Booth never quite states – is that, if Larkin is in both these characters, he is effectively in neither.

This is further complicated when Coleman's protagonist meets people from Larkin's real world and also the Creature from his fictional world:

> Marie stumbled across the Smoke Room door, and pushed it slightly ajar. A motley and varied scene met her eyes. At a piano in the corner sat the Creature, picking out in an incompetent fashion a negro twelve-bar blues; next to him a small medical student was smoking a cigarette, and next to him was a fair haired lieutenant talking about a man in the train […]
>
> 'But what are you going to *call* it, Bruce dear?'
>
> 'I shall call it,' said the young man in the voice of one who has no doubt, '*The Case of the Gilded Fly*'. (Booth, 2018, p. 230)

In his biography, Bradford inserts a letter written by Larkin to Norman Iles highlighting who these people are: 'we went drinking last night with Bruce Montgomery, Philip and two freshmen and Lt Colin Strang and Kingsley did The Man in the Train' (cited in Bradford, 2005, Letter from Larkin to Iles, 5 June 1943, 55). Furthermore, Bradford argues that 'not only had Larkin introduced his fictional character [Marie] to some of his actual acquaintance, but he also further guarantees the authenticity of this world by basing it upon a real event' (Bradford, 2005, 55). Is the 'Creature' who is incompetently choosing a 'negro twelve bar blues', Larkin? One could argue that it is, given the almost self-deprecatory tone he uses to introduce the character – one so close to the tone used in his own letters ('A lot of 'serious' stories I intended to write all seem negro's cock to me at present. So, I piss about spending money, doing housework, tossing myself off (to put it crudely), and listening to Those Awful Blaring Jazz Things' (Larkin to Amis, 13 August 1943, Thwaite, 1992, 62). Or indeed there is the clue in the name 'Creature' itself – a name which Larkin frequently uses to refer to himself in his letters. Either way, if the 'Creature' is in the stories, then Larkin cannot be

solely identifying with Coleman. The Creature is a representation of the fictionality of both this story and of Larkin's own letters. I argue that neither story nor letter should be read as windows onto his soul. Rather, Larkin preferred to enter a world constructed by himself rather than to live in the real one.

Prefacing this scene, Marie approaches two fictional characters from the previous story *Trouble at the Willow Gables*. They inform her that she is not part of the 'reality' of this story at all but rather that she lives only in the 'fictional' world of Willow Gables: '"The story's over now, Miss Marie", she answered. "Willow Gables doesn't exist anymore"' (Booth, 2002, p. 229). After her immediate uneasiness to discover that she is part of a fictional construct, Marie enquires: 'But if this is a story […] where's real life? If this is all untrue, where's reality?' (Booth, 229). Pointed in the direction of the smoke room, Marie opens the door to people from Larkin's life sitting at the piano. Her reaction is particularly significant: Marie immediately decides that she does not like the real world she unveils behind the smokeroom door. Therefore, she 'shut the door hastily. If this was reality, she decided, she would rather keep in the story' (230). This is pivotal for our reading of Larkin's works - particularly his letters. Here, through the character of Marie, Larkin demonstrates his recognition of the ability to open and shut the door on both reality and the imaginary. Moreover, we can discern Larkin's yearning to remain in those fictional worlds rather than return to reality – a yearning echoed in all his writing. His poetry, novels, and indeed his letters, most importantly, act as hinges that allow Larkin to swing both in and out of reality.

Finally, Bradford surmises that Brunette Coleman 'concludes Larkin's period in a world inhabited and created by someone else. He allowed Marie to return to it, but he was moving on elsewhere' (Bradford, 2005, 55). In a sense, Larkin did conclude the fictional world of Coleman, and he did move on to become Philip Larkin, but the Larkin he became was one who created multiple imaginary realms. Therefore, the Coleman writings served their purpose

for a juvenile Larkin – they allowed him to play with his two worlds and experiment with what it was like to leave reality. So, Larkin may have closed the door on Brunette, but he opened another to Larkin the fictional prose writer, Larkin the poet, and Larkin the letter writer, the Seal and most significantly, the Creature.

Unlocking the door

This introduction began by returning us to where the biographical readings of Larkin arose and discussed how his letters were also drawn upon as a vital source of evidence into his life. However, as the publications of the three editions of letters – *Selected Letters, Letters to Monica* and *Letters Home* – all present an alternative version of Larkin, then it has been essential to revisit these conventional readings. In doing so, it becomes apparent that Larkin's letters are less about the life than they are literary texts themselves. When Larkin composed a letter – albeit to an individual reader or with his posthumous reader in mind – he constructed fictional worlds that allowed him to momentarily escape from reality. As he left home for Oxford he stepped over the threshold from reality into fiction. From that point on, when he started writing letters home, and as Coleman, Larkin was able to hinge between two worlds. For Larkin, this was the moment he unlocked the door of reality and stepped outside. Being unable to close the door behind him, Larkin's use of the pen allowed him to hinge between worlds for the duration of his writing career.

To exemplify this premise, this study is divided into three parts, looking at the presentation of Larkin in *Selected Letters*, *Letters to Monica* and *Letters Home*. By doing so, it will revisit the initial receptions of the editions and explore the fictionalised worlds present within them rather the searching for biographical information. Each section will also draw on Larkin's literary writing – novels, poetry, essays – but only to further evidence Larkin's attitude towards the epistolary and the creation of these fabricated worlds, and to magnify that these constructed worlds also existed in the literary writing. Each section will begin by

exploring the role the editor plays in presenting their version of Larkin – and how these can influence our own interpretations of them. They will also explore Larkin's attitude towards letter writing found in his essays and interviews. Therefore, this is the first comprehensive study to focus on all Larkin's editions of letters and what they reveal about him as an epistolary writer. This study will be divided up in the following structure.

Given that the first collection of correspondence *Selected Letters* caused – and has continued to cause – widespread division amongst Larkin scholars, it is imperative that we begin there. The correspondents within it that caused the most damage to Larkin's reputation were undoubtedly Larkin's letters to James Ballard Sutton, Colin Gunner, Robert Conquest and Kingsley Amis. James Underwood in 2015 has explored the epistolary performances within the Larkin-Sutton and the Larkin-Gunner correspondences. Therefore, these correspondences are not included in detail in Part I. Also, though the correspondence between Larkin and Conquest beckoned questioning into Larkin's misogynistic tendencies, there did not appear to be enough scope to base an entire section of this thesis upon them. Rather, the volume of criticism that Larkin's letters to Kingsley Amis has received highlights that these letters have been determined to be a 'true' representation of Larkin. Therefore, the primary focus of Part I is on Larkin's correspondence with Kingsley Amis to argue against this and to present the fictional world that they inhabit. Whilst there are studies on their relationship – namely Bradford's '*The Odd Couple: The Curious Relationship between Kingsley Amis and Philip Larkin* and Steinberg's exploration of their letters in her monograph – these studies have used the letters to tell us more about the life of Larkin or about Larkin's poetry. Here, however, I will focus entirely on how Larkin's letters to Amis reveal a manufactured world between two men who play the roles of exaggerated misogynists by heavily indulging in schoolgirl fantasies, sex, and pornography. Moreover, I will demonstrate Larkin's desire – or indeed performed desire – to leave his own reality and live in the world that Amis presents to

him. This leitmotif is exemplified in Larkin's novel *Jill* and his posthumously published poem 'Letter to a Friend about Girls'. These literary texts will be drawn upon not to demonstrate Larkin's real relationship with Amis but to reinforce that this world was a constructed world carried across to the literary texts. Finally, this section will end by attempting to rebalance the apparent misogyny uncovered in *Selected Letters* by including a cache of letters written to women that were excluded or underplayed in Thwaite's edition. Here, I must explain that Larkin's letters to women will not be presented as biographical, or indeed as a defence of the misogynistic criticism, but as a reinforcement that Larkin performed in all of his letters, not just with Amis. This inclusion of more letters written to women sets the tone for my discussion of Thwaite's second edition of letters, *Letters to Monica* which I will explore in Part II of this thesis.

In Part II of this study, I will explore the infamous correspondence between Larkin and his long-term companion / lover, Monica Jones. Following its publication, Larkin scholars began revising their previous perceptions of Larkin that they had formed just twenty years earlier. As the edition presented an entirely unrecognisable Larkin – one who was caring, affectionate, kind – the letters called for a recalibration of how we view Larkin. However, this section will not be presenting *Letters to Monica* as a more intimate and honest unveiling of the man – as it continues to be received – but it will use the correspondence to reinforce how Larkin constructed versions of himself to suit his individual reader. Moreover, *Letters to Monica* demonstrates more clearly than the previous collection of letters, Larkin's predilection for creating imaginary worlds – most notably, the world of the Rabbit and Seal – and how these constructed worlds emphasise a conflict between fiction and reality. This theme is epitomised in Larkin's second novel, *A Girl in Winter*, exploring how in reality the characters cannot live up to the constructed versions of themselves. Therefore, this text will

be drawn upon as evidence to Larkin's yearning for a life outside reality as demonstrated in his letters to Jones.

Finally, then, Part III will focus on the latest edition of letters to be published, *Letters Home*. This is the first study to deal comprehensively with Larkin's letters to his sister Kitty, his father Sydney, and his mother Eva. However, this edition unveils more clearly than ever before Larkin's ability to manipulate personae. This can be noted first by the fact that the publication of *Letters Home* is the third time Larkin scholars had to review their conceptions of Larkin based on his correspondence. Second, however, and more specific to this study, is the inclusion of Larkin's illustrations within Booth's edition. The illustrations of Larkin's 'Creature' magnifies his fictional worlds. First noted in Brunette Coleman's *Michaelmas Term at St Bride's*, the Creature was created as a caricature for Larkin in his letters home. Initially, the Creature allowed Larkin to present multiple versions of himself to his mother, father, and sister. However, after his father died and the epistolary relationship became one between mother-and-son, the Creature took on a new lease of life. Larkin involved his mother by inviting her to join him in this world of Young Creature and Old Creature – an alternative existence that they remained in until she died in 1977. This world is also reflected in the language of the letters. Larkin created stories for his mother based on this Creature which allowed him to leave reality and enter a fresher, more fruitful, constructed youth. Within this construction of a childlike world, there are echoes of one famous Edwardian children's author. This section will, for the first time, unveil Larkin's admiration for the author Beatrix Potter. Though she is footnoted and mentioned on the odd occasion in biographies – James Booth's *Life, Art and Love* – her influence over Larkin's epistolary writing has never before been considered. Therefore, this hidden influence will seep from beneath the floorboards of Larkin scholarship and reinforce further the fictionality present in Larkin's letters. This influence, tied with the creation of the Creature, will then be broadened out to explore more

of Larkin's letters to women. Here, I must note that the letters to women are not drawn upon to demonstrate that Larkin viewed women as a homogenous group, but rather to illustrate that what started out as a fictional world between Larkin and his mother was transferred across to each of the significant women in his life. Finally, this thesis will end by returning to the poetry. This will not be to reread the poetry in light of new biographical information. Nor will it be to encourage the reader to separate the letters from the literature. Rather, it will tie together the role that 'Epistolary Larkin' plays in recognising that all of Larkin's writing – personal and professional – hinges between the real and the imagined.

Part I: *Selected Letters*

Prelude

The publication of Larkin's Letters created a controversary in England that has not yet subsided and will go on echoing for years. Almost all of the discussion has focused on the most repellent aspects of the correspondence: Larkin's racism, his xenophobia, his misogyny. It is as if he had exposed the sewer of the English soul. (Hirsch, 1993, p. 116)

It was only when writing to his friends that Larkin felt able to reveal his true, and altogether less endearing social views. (Eagleton, 1993)

Be forewarned: this book will not make for pleasant reading for the humourless politically correct. If, on the other hand, you do not object to a misanthrope's self-deprecating good humour, his bilious verbal assaults on friends and enemies alike, and his sharp jabs at contemporary institutions and mores, university education, and the like, then prepare yourself for a delightful romp through Larkinland. (Wright, 1993)

Introduction

Part I of this thesis explores the first publication in 1992 of Larkin's letters: *Selected Letters 1940 – 1985.* It is not new to note that once the public got a hold of this edition, Larkin's reputation suffered an incredible downfall: Larkin was condemned as racist, xenophobic, misanthropic and misogynistic. Of course, there was ample material in the *Selected Letters* to confirm these charges. However, although first considered an 'exhaustive' 700-page edition of correspondence, there are many letters excluded from it – letters that may not have atoned for the obscenities, but which would have offered another perspective on Philip Larkin the man and the writer. Of course, since then, *Letters to Monica* and *Letters Home* have been made available to the general reader. However, this section focuses solely on *Selected Letters* and what else *could* have been included in that particular edition. One of the most significant charges levelled at Larkin was that of misogyny – particularly found in letters written to long term friend and literary contemporary, Kingsley Amis. However, in *Selected Letters*, we can find many letters written from Larkin *about* women, but we struggle to find as many written *to* women (certainly for the first half of the edition when not a single female correspondent is documented). This part of this thesis aims to rectify this. First it will begin by exploring

Thwaite's presentation of Larkin in *Selected Letters*. It will present the correspondence between Larkin and Amis as less of a biographical insight into the sexual attitudes of both men, but rather as an insight into their literary imagination, exploring how both authors used the letter as a portal intertwining fiction and reality. Second, I will employ Larkin's first novel *Jill* as a case study – a novel which unveils Larkin's attitude towards the letter more than it does his life in Oxford. Finally, I will introduce a different version of 'selected letters' by selecting many of the letters that have been left out to confirm Larkin's ability to manipulate personae through the form of the letter.

Editorial Statement: Larkin I

Rebecca Earle, in her insightful *Epistolary Selves,* correctly records that 'personal letters, particularly those written with no apparent thought to publication, have often been read as windows into the soul of the author' (Earle, 1999, p. 5). Philip Larkin's letters are a case in point as many critics and biographers, have read his letters as the unveiling of his true self – with devastating effects. To reiterate, since 1992, Larkin's reputation has been hit with allegations similar to that of Professor Lisa Jardine's famous statement that he was an 'easy misogynist' (Jardine, 1992, p. 4). She formed this conclusion following the publication of the *Selected Letters* after she was appalled by his 'throwaway derogatory remarks about women' (Jardine, 1992, p. 4). Many of the articles and books published since have followed this train of thought, dissecting Larkin's poetry with this misogynistic persona overshadowing all else. How we have read and interpreted the correspondence between Larkin and Amis is not solely the reader's fault, or indeed Jardine's for that matter. The presentation, editing and release of those letters into the public realm have a lot to answer for.

The correspondence was first introduced to the public in the early nineties after the release of Anthony Thwaite's *Selected Letters* in 1992 and was followed by Motion's biography *A Writer's Life* one year later in 1993. In his introduction to the letters, Thwaite declares that,

‘the time may come when all Larkin’s surviving letters are gathered together and published; but it seemed right to me and to Larkin’s other executors that the volume should be a first presentation rather than a complete and exhaustive archive’ (1992, xi). It was certainly an interesting first presentation. The first edition to ever meet the public eye, which documents correspondence by Larkin from 1940, spans over an entire decade before it includes a single letter written to a female correspondent (Winifred Arnott in 1951). However, within those first ten years, the attitudes towards women that Larkin expressed in order to impress Amis pervade the letters – a derogatory attitude that views women as stupid, inconvenient, and sexual. With the omission of letters to women until 1951, then undoubtedly a perception of Larkin the man has already been created in the reader’s mind by the point they reach Larkin’s letter to Arnott on page 174 of the edition - one which completely excludes how he interacts with the opposite sex, despite the reader supposedly knowing his most ‘intimate’ thoughts. At this stage, readers have explored 125 letters written by Larkin to men without a single inclusion of a letter written to a female. We know, from the two editions that have since been released, that Larkin had corresponded with both Jones and home before this date. Thwaite justifies his rationale for excluding his letters to his family: ‘these would have swelled the book to unmanageable proportions’ (Thwaite, 1992, p. xi). Though there are thousands of letters written home, the inclusion of *some* of Larkin’s letters to his sister Kitty or indeed his mother Eva would not have swelled the edition but rather would have offered another perspective than the narrow one we received. How can we claim to know Larkin’s attitudes towards women if we cannot see any interactions with women? Nevertheless, critics like Rossen and Jardine did claim to know Larkin’s views towards women from reading his letters to James Sutton and Kingsley Amis. Rather than looking at what Larkin had to say *to* women, the focus was on what he said *about* women in his letters to men. In this part, I will focus on Larkin’s letters to Kingsley Amis. My reason is twofold: In the introduction, I briefly

discussed Larkin's letters to Sutton and how James Underwood in his study 'Philip Larkin's Textual Identities' explored their epistolary relationship. Therefore, for the purpose of originality, I intend to explore the Larkin – Amis correspondence. Here, I must add that their letters have been explored in detail by both Richard Bradford (2005) and Gillian Steinberg (2010). However, they have been employed to tell us more about the life or the literary texts. My argument will focus on the letters themselves to reveal the epistolary world that Larkin created for himself and Amis – a world that rotated around the topics of women, sex, pornography and schoolgirls.

The letters written to his college friend and literary contemporary, Kingsley Amis, dominate the first ten years of the printed edition, especially with regards to speaking about women, illuminating a certain adolescent vulgarity: 'I don't fuckin' drink, I don't fuckin' smoke (except a pipe – aaooh!), I don't fuckin' fuck women – I may as well be fuckin' dead' (Larkin to Amis, 12 August 1942, Thwaite 1992, p 42). A few years later, during Larkin's relationship with Ruth Bowman, his letters to Amis do indeed harbour misogynistic tendencies: 'I have to PAY for TWO women at the PUB and the FLICKS instead of ONE and I DON'T get my COCK into EITHER of them, EVER' (Larkin to Amis, 17 July 1946, p.119). Undeniably, the content is offensive. However, the non-existence of letters to female correspondents to offset the tone of these letters gives these letters an unfair advantage: they enabled readers to prosecute Larkin as misogynistic without fair trial. Surely, this calls into question what exactly was Thwaite aiming to present in that first edition? If we had the inclusion of his letters to Ruth Bowman – if unavailable, the letters written to his mother or sister – it would undoubtedly have broadened the perspective. Interestingly, Janice Rossen, a critic who has followed Jardine's view on Larkin's attitude towards women, does note that the editing of the edition is somewhat problematic:

> Part of the fault with *Selected Letters 1940-1985* lies in the editing. In one way it is scrupulously, painstakingly exact […] In essential ways, however, the entire effort

> seems to have foundered in an attempt to be inclusive (even exhaustive) rather than selective in a way which would show Larkin's talents. Many of the choices seem off-kilter. By page 461 we have arrived at the harrowing milestone of Larkin at Fifty; and there are still some three hundred pages until the end of the book. It seems a bit out of proportion, especially since many of his most interesting letters were written when Larkin was younger. One might also question why the editor included so many literary letters of the type which are tedious to read […] missives to Larkin's many ladyloves are thin on the ground: perhaps it was wiser to be sparing with them, as he seems to have rather little of interest to say there either. (Rossen, 1994, p. 577)

Though Rossen suggests that the volume is exhaustive, the over 700-page collection is merely a drop in the ocean of Larkin's relentless letter writing. Rossen is on to something, however. The content, albeit selective, is indeed exhaustive where Thwaite has *chosen* it to be so. Despite assuring his readers that he has been 'selective' in an attempt to avoid repetition, this is not the case. Rossen notes that many literary letters do recur. However, I would argue that a heavy repetition lies also in the content – particularly those written to Kingsley Amis – where Larkin's derogatory, if not obscene, remarks are printed in multitude. For example, letters expressing sentiments such as, 'I bagged LESBIANISM and ANAL EROTISM' (Larkin to Amis 1992, 9 July 1945, 1992, p. 103) and 'WHEN I'M TOSSING MYSELF' (Larkin to Amis, 26 February 1947, 1992, p. 135) occur time and time again throughout the edition. Moreover, they are particularly prevalent among the first two hundred pages, presenting Larkin as a misogynist from the beginning. Moreover, many of these letters contain capitalisation of words (like the one above) which are certainly more eye-catching to the reader. Rossen also accurately acknowledges that Larkin's letters to women are scarce and justifies this by suggesting Thwaite was probably doing the women in Larkin's life a favour. This is where her argument loses credibility. By including letters written *about* women and excluding letters written *to* women, Thwaite is doing both Larkin and the women in his life a disservice. Had some of these repetitive styles of letter been excluded and replaced with letters to women during the forties, readers may have formed an alternative conclusion of Larkin and his attitude towards women.

In 2002, Maeve Brennan, one of the most important relationships in Larkin's life, took to writing her own monograph. The title alone, *The Philip Larkin I Knew*, suggests to the public that a certain misrepresentation has gone on and is surely evidence that Thwaite's first representation is far from comprehensive. This becomes even more evident when *Letters to Monica* is published in 2010. Readers' views of Larkin were finally able to broaden due to Thwaite's new 'selective' edition – and here the repetition set a very different tone presenting a new and improved Larkin. The reviews for this edition are striking in their distinction from the reviews written twenty years prior: Rachel Cooke noted that this correspondence revealed 'Larkin's deep love and admiration for a woman who was clever, eccentric, loud, unusual, flamboyant, opinionated and strong'. She concluded that in her experience, 'misogynists tend not to go a bundle for women with minds of their own' (Cooke, 2010). Many critics followed Cooke's train of thought, leaving Jonathan Bate to correctly conclude that 'had the letters been made available, the *Selected Letters* would have done less damage to Larkin's reputation' (Longley, 2015, p. 174). In the *Selected Letters*, there are only three letters written to Jones, despite the fact that she was one of his principal correspondents. Of course, his letters to her were embargoed at the time, but the letters to his mother, the other dominant correspondent in his life, were not. Neither were Larkin's letters to Barbara Pym, Judy Egerton, Brenda Moon, Betty Mackereth, or his sister Kitty, yet these letters are only sporadically present towards the end of the original volume. This certainly eclipses the overall picture of Larkin's attitude and relationships with women as Thwaite provided us with a very selective 'first presentation' of Larkin; with this in mind, the outcome of Larkin being deemed as a misogynist was almost inevitable. We have missed out on the variety of perspectives we could have been offered had the selection process balanced his letters to Amis with the very different insights offered in his letters to female correspondents.

Thwaite cannot bear sole responsibility for Larkin's reception as a misogynist, however. One year after the release of *Selected Letters*, the first biography of Larkin was published by his other literary executor, Andrew Motion – a book which leaves an impression similar to that of Thwaite's edition. Motion evidently latched on to the term 'attitude towards women' which he lists as a subtitle in his index in his biography under 'character and attitudes'. Its inclusion reinforces to readers the idea that Larkin truly was who Thwaite presented him as in *Selected Letters*. More specifically, it suggests that the letters to Amis were the real Larkin rather than implying that he was adapting a fictionalised version of himself for his recipient.

Motion offers little counterevidence for Thwaite's presentation. In fact, he emphasises it. Repeatedly in his biography, Motion draws on Larkin's letters to Amis to define his attitudes towards women: Describing Larkin's days in Oxford, he observes, 'the nervous antagonism he [Larkin] had shown towards women in his first term had increased steadily until his last' (Motion, 1993, p. 118). Then, he declares that Larkin 'summed up his thoughts' on women – as early as 1943 – in the letter to Amis:

> I personally think that going out with women is not worth it. I don't want to start a serious argument exactly, but the amount of time one has to lay out in tedious and expensive and embarrassing pursuits seems to me too much for what sketchy and problematic gains may accrue. If there were a straightforward social code that copulation could be indulged in after a couple of drinks (one of which the women stood) then I should be more enthusiastic… I wrote a poem yesterday, this is it:
>
> I would give all I possess
> (Money keys wallet personal effects and articles of dress)
>
> To stick my tool
> Up the prettiest girl in Warwick King's High School. (Larkin to Amis, 8 October 1943, p.118)

The opening line of the letter does initially suggest that Larkin is sharing a frustration with the opposite sex. However, the problem does not seem to be with the women themselves, but more with how Larkin presents himself to women. A careful consideration of the words

‘embarrassing’, ‘sketchy’, and ‘problematic’ suggests that it is Larkin who finds it difficult to be with women – not that the women themselves are difficult. However, as this is immediately counteracted by the inclusion of the poem which directly express his desire to want to have sex it leaves this letter more complex, and perhaps easier to read from Motion’s point of view. Undoubtedly, the poem is more eye-catching to the reader than the prose of the letter as it engages in the difficult themes of misogyny and sexual fantasies of high school girls. However, surely it is not enough evidence to be drawn upon as a ‘summing up’ of his attitudes towards women? It is certainly reductive for Motion to imply that this one letter written to his college friend sums up Larkin’s entire thoughts on women.

As with *Selected Letters,* Larkin’s letters to his sister or mother during these years are not drawn on in Motion’s biography. Further, Motion made no attempt to alter the image of Larkin that was emerging from Thwaite’s first edition. This becomes most evident during his exploration of Larkin’s relationship with Ruth Bowman. When Motion divulges the details of Larkin’s first serious romance, he does not draw on Bowman’s accounts but rather uses the correspondence between Larkin and Amis as hard evidence:

> I took Miss Ruth to Shrewsbury to see… Night Club Boom and I should say about 45 seconds of the Club Condon. This was worth the 1/8d. I paid for our admission but not the 5.2d. I paid for our railway fares or the 4/8d. for our scrambled eggs afterwards, or for the 4/1d. for subsequent drink. Don’t you think it’s ABSOLUTELY SHAMEFUL that men have to pay for women without BEING ALLOWED TO SHAG the women afterwards AS A MATTER OF COURSE? I do: simply DISGUSTING. It makes me ANGRY. Everything about a ree-lay-shun-ship between men and women makes me *angry*. It’s all a fucking balls up (Larkin to Amis, n.d., 1946, p. 143).

For Motion, ‘every time he visited Amis, Larkin was encouraged to harden his heart against sentiment’ (p. 143). On a first read, this letter, of course, does present a severe lack of sentiment towards Bowman, and more importantly, presents his attitudes towards women as derogatory and disrespectful. On closer scrutiny, however, we cannot ignore the clear hyperbolic phrases and capitalisation used in this and in Larkin’s other letters to Amis. Larkin

is undoubtedly performing masculinity to excess here which bears no mention in Motion's biography. Indeed, not only is performance not acknowledged, but letters like these are employed as factual insights into Larkin's life; Larkin's letters to Amis in the first 300 pages of Motion's biography are all drawn upon to present a true picture of who Larkin was, even when discussing a separate relationship with Ruth Bowman – as though it was with Amis alone that Larkin was truly honest. This ought to force us to question the reliability of these letters as a biographical source into Larkin's relationship with Bowman. Moreover, letters written to Ruth Bowman are non-existent in Motion's biography which forces us to question the reliability of the presentation of their relationship more generally. How can we claim to know about their relationship if we have not heard it from either party? What is more interesting is what Bowman (now Siverns) had to say about Larkin in 2003. Interviewed by Allison Steadman for 'Philip Larkin: Love and Death in Hull', Bowman made an observation about Larkin's friendship with Kingsley Amis: 'He wanted to impress Kingsley. Very much he wanted to impress Kingsley. And, therefore, his behaviour, I thought, became unbearable when they were together' (Steadman, 2003). This suggests that Ruth felt that Larkin was showing off in front of his Oxford contemporary. Of course, we cannot use Bowman's experience to draw conclusions that she knew him better than Amis. However, what we can do is recognise that Larkin clearly presented two different versions of himself to Bowman and Amis. Therefore, we cannot use Larkin's letters to Amis as an insight or presentation of his relationship with Bowman given that both people clearly knew a different Larkin.

What is more interesting about Motion's use of the personal correspondence, such as Amis's, as biographical evidence is that he is rather selective in which of Larkin's correspondences he chooses to rely on as a source for Larkin's life. When discussing Larkin's epistolary relationship with Barbara Pym, for example, Motion's critique of those letters takes a fascinating turn: 'Larkin's letters to Pym are completely genuine, even if they exhibit

only one facet of his personality', Motion writes. Firstly, how does Motion know that Larkin's letters to Pym are 'genuine'? Secondly, does this suggest that Larkin's letters to other correspondents were not? Finally, and more importantly, surely this invalidates all the previous letters written to Amis which Motion employed as insights into Larkin's life? Moreover, by page 332, Motion's consideration of Larkin's letters is entirely different to the first half of the book: 'as he [Larkin] grew older he was more inclined to show each of his correspondents the face he knew would please them most: slightly old man-ish for Pym, bloke-ish for Amis, double bloke-ish for Conquest' (pp. 332-3). It seems odd that Motion did not mention any of this when he was documenting letter after letter to 'sum up' Larkin's attitudes towards women, or indeed when referencing the letter above on page 60. Moreover, it has taken over 300 pages before Motion implies that Larkin may have been putting on a performance for Amis, and even then, the implication is that this 'performance' only started when Larkin was an old man. If we look at the letter on page 60, the capitalisation alone suggests that Larkin is undeniably exaggerating his feelings to entertain his reader – which would back up Motion's argument that Larkin is taking on a 'bloke-ish' persona in his letters to Amis. His attitude towards sex with his girlfriend does appear to be overplayed for Amis's entertainment and should be read as representative of Larkin's relationship with Amis rather than representative of his broader feelings towards women. Had Motion illuminated to the reader that Larkin was putting on a persona earlier in the biography then his reader's view towards Larkin in 1993 might not have been so narrow.

What is even more confusing about Motion's argument about Larkin's letter writing is that it appears he has decided to pick and choose which aspects of Larkin's personalities are true and which are not – or more precisely, which letters are true, and which are not. When turning to Larkin's letters to childhood friend Colin Gunner, Motion concluded that it was here that Larkin 'unburdened himself of his most virulent opinions' (p. 409). Motion tells his

reader that because Larkin 'knew how to entertain Gunner, they represent only a part of him. They are a kind of grim joke. Yet at the same time they are not a joke at all' (p. 409). Unfortunately, Motion cannot have it both ways. He is in one half of the book presenting Larkin's letters as biographical, and then in the second half asserting that they are a performance. Moreover, his critique of the performative aspects of the letters in no way balances out the number of letters he has drawn upon as factual evidence for Larkin's attitudes to women. In this sense, by underplaying the performative aspects of Larkin's letters, Motion has also done Larkin's reputation a disservice. Larkin's letters to Amis are not solely biographical. Rather, they have just as much fictionalisation in them as any other correspondence and cannot be drawn upon as concrete evidence for Larkin's wider 'attitudes towards women'.

Next, I will explore the performative aspects of the Larkin - Amis correspondence to rectify the misrepresentation of Thwaite and Motion's initial presentation. Rather than drawing on the letters to expose his attitudes and feelings towards women and romantic relationships (the subject of Part II and III of this thesis), I will firstly concentrate on his relationship with Amis alone. As Janet Gurkin Altmann recognises in *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form,* 'the most distinctive aspect of epistolary language is the extent to which it is coloured by not one but two persons and by the specific relationship between them' (Altman, 1982, p. 118). Before turning to the Larkin-Amis correspondence, I will draw on Larkin's first novel *Jill* (1946)– a novel that explores the importance of addresser and addressee in letter writing. The novel was written during the time Larkin was predominantly exchanging letters with Amis and has often been drawn upon as evidence for Larkin's life in Oxford. In fact, in his new introduction to the text, Larkin had to discourage readers from reading the novel in this light: 'My original purpose in writing an introduction of this kind was to make clear that my own Oxford life was rather different from that of my hero'

(Larkin, 1982, p. 25). Therefore, I will not be using *Jill* to draw biographical insights into the life of Larkin and Amis, but rather drawing on it to explore the theme of epistolary that pervades the novels. Larkin's protagonist John Kemp uses letter writing to create imaginary worlds that enabled him to step out of reality, in the same way that Larkin's letters to Amis hinged between the fictional and the real. The originality of my reading of *Jill* lies within these imaginary worlds – not with how the protagonist John Kemp can be identified with Philip Larkin the man, but with how John Kemp's letter writing sheds a significant light on Larkin's own attitude towards letter writing – and this pivotal reading can be transferred across to Larkin's own letters: particularly his letters to Kingsley Amis.

Jill

Larkin's very first novel, *Jill*, which was written at the time of many of the letters sent to Kingsley Amis documented in *Selected Letters*, identifies Larkin's own attitudes to letter writing: a recognition that the letter is a platform by which you can create caricatures to entertain the recipient. This reading of the novel would have evidenced Motion's argument that Larkin did indeed perform in his letters and could have provided a broader perspective for his readers in the early 1990s. However, Motion does not on any occasion refer to *Jill* when dissecting Larkin's letters. What is most striking about this is that the novel was written during the 1940s, the same time that the majority of printed letters between Larkin and Amis are written, which could have added another dimension to our reading of this particular correspondence. However, Motion fails to acknowledge this, despite claiming that the book has an autobiographical edge relating to Larkin's life in Oxford: 'Although Larkin said that readers should not identify him too closely with Kemp, the fictional and real-life characters are obviously linked' (Motion, 1993, p. 36). Despite this acknowledgement, Motion made no attempt to even suggest that the letters between Larkin and Amis may echo the relationship between the characters Kemp and Warner – even though claiming that they reflect Larkin's

life as an undergraduate. I am not asserting that the novel is an autobiographical text by any means; rather I offer the novel up as an alternative perspective for how we should approach Larkin's letters, and especially the letters written to Amis which ruined his reputation. In this sense, *Jill* invites us to challenge the conventional notion of Larkin as an 'easy misogynist' in his letters to Amis and the authenticity of their letters more generally.

Describing it as 'a tremendous mixture of truth and fiction' (Thwaite, 2001, p. 33), Larkin's first novel *Jill* was first published in 1946 shortly after he graduated from Oxford University. The unsettled and inexperienced protagonist, John Kemp, moved from North England to start his degree at Oxford, when he first meets his new roommate, Christopher Warner. Evidently, from the onset, they are entirely different. Kemp was 'undersized' with 'soft pale hair brushed childishly from left to right' with a thin face (Larkin, 1964, p. 1). Warner, by comparison was 'taller and stronger', with 'dark dry hair pushed back, with a thick nose and broad shoulders' (p. 4). Appearance was not the only obvious dissimilarity; they both led equally sheltered lives but from opposite class backgrounds. 'John had not travelled much before' his journey to University, seated in the third-class carriage on the train, before being forced to take a taxi, 'a thing he had never done before'. He had to cram everything he owned into one bag which he 'could hardly carry […] twenty yards, it was so heavy' (p. 4). His 'cheap blue overcoat' with the 'lapels of it curled outwards and creases dragged from the buttons' (p. 1) was no match for Warner's 'dark grey lounge suit and dark blue suit' with a 'square-faced gold ring' (p. 7) placed on his right hand. Ultimately, Warner's material means leave Kemp feeling insignificant in the room. 'No one would think that two people lived here, he thought', his 'badly worn' slippers were lost amongst his roommates 'leather writing-wallet', his 'fancy stone ashtray' and 'silk cushions' (p. 17) which lay on the sofa. 'I'm afraid I've sort of taken possession' (p. 7), Warner admits on their first meeting. However, this introduction to Warner's dominance reflects the relationship that continues throughout the novel. Warner is mischievous,

boisterous, relaxed, and confident – everything that Kemp is not – leaving Warner the superior of the two. In an attempt to discover more about his roommate Kemp begins to inspect Warner's letter-case. Hoping that these letters would reveal something about Warner's personality (as the conventional notion of letters suggests), he finds one letter from Warner's mother. As reality keeps Kemp at a distance from Warner's world, he turns to the letter as a way in. This is the first time that letters are introduced in the novel, drawn upon biographically as a means of 'getting to know' the person writing them. However, there is a subtle hint that perhaps Kemp recognised that there was likely to be another hidden aspect to Warner's personality: one that the letters would aid to unveil and help Kemp find some common ground with his roommate.

One of the main plot devices of Larkin's first novel is the yearning Kemp feels to fit into Warner's social circle. After meeting Warner, Kemp adapts his personality to match Warner's, despite not actually enjoying the recreational habits: 'By playing off the taste of the beer against the taste of the tobacco, he managed to find each fairly pleasant' (p. 97). Interestingly, rather than only trying to fit in, Kemp actually attempts to model himself on Warner: 'John leaned in the shade and blew smoke into the sunlight. Try as he would, he could not make it like Christopher did' (p. 97). However, after overhearing a conversation of his rejection by Warner and his girlfriend Elizabeth, Kemp is removed from his imaginary world and brought back to the world of reality. His attempts at buying bowties, drinking and smoking, lunch with Warner's mother, had all failed:

> How should he face Christopher now? And at this thought the last remnants of his illusion collapsed like the last wall of a demolished house. After all, then, he was on his own; he had failed, utterly and ignominiously failed to weave himself into the lives of these people. (p. 114)

However, just as all hope was lost, and Kemp was beginning to accept that he would remain on the outside, he received a letter from his sister. Kemp saw (or imagined) a spark of interest

come across Warner's face; for the first time, he was attentive to Kemp's life rather than the other way around. Of course, with his own lack of self-confidence, Kemp's real family life would be too boring for Warner, and so he created a more desirable sister, Jill: one who would be more likely to fit into Warner's social circle. 'She will be beautiful', he says, 'and clever, cleverer than I am, probably' (p. 97). Through desperation to maintain that flicker of interest from Warner, he continues to construct her character: Jill enjoys going to the theatre with her brother John, they holiday together and both share an interest in poetry. For a moment he felt equal to Warner and, finally, by the creation of an imaginary caricature, Kemp felt somewhat accepted:

> He sat down at the desk and spread the sheets of paper out, switching on the reading lamp with a careless movement. John was content to be ignored, for he was astonished, both at his lies and at their effect. And they had affected him no less than Christopher: he was excited, filled with tentative little lyrical thoughts, like the orchestra before the overture to an opera. He was not surprised at himself for telling lies, but for telling them so easily. (p. 100)

Within these lies a sense of artistry was beginning to form. These 'lyrical thoughts', that were floating around in his imagination would now be put to better use in a more physical form: His fabrications would continue to flow, moving from storytelling to writing a letter from Jill and sending it to himself. This allows Kemp to step in and out of reality as he transcends from the socially inept Oxford scholar to the more socially engaging character he would have liked to be. This has a transformative effect as letter writing in the novel has shifted from the biographical means of 'getting to know' Warner, to a more fictional position – where I argue Larkin's own letters stand.

With eager precision, ensuring the handwriting was identical, and that the Jill in the letter reflects the one he described, he begins to write the letter. After carefully alluding to her talent in English Literature – 'I came top in English this fortnight (pom-tiddly-pompom)' (p. 122) – their family holidays, and her contempt for school after her friend Patsy left, he placed

the letter on the mantelpiece in their shared living room (p. 122). By using the fictional caricature of Jill, it has allowed Kemp to escape his reality and create a world where he no longer feels inferior to those around him – if only for a moment. Although he long desired to be more like him, Kemp, in this moment, did not envy Warner's wealth or his promiscuity: 'These were very fine things, but they were losing their lustre as ideals. He yawned' (p. 123). However, this is quickly overturned when he comes home and realises that the letter has remained untouched, and 'the hold over him (if it really existed)' (p. 121) was, in reality, only imaginary. After a heated disagreement with Warner, Kemp finds himself placed firmly back in his inferior position: 'Where there had been indifference to him, tears pricked his eyes' (129). What could he do now? 'He had no means of retaliation – only Jill' (p. 129). In an attempt to regain Warner's attention Kemp informs him that he supposes he will 'have to answer Jill's letter some time' (p. 129). Here the letter writing focus shifts once again; rather than creating an imaginary sister for whom Kemp is able to write letters as if he is her, Kemp will now use the letter as a door that allows him to move in and out of reality. It enables him to present himself to his imaginary correspondent as someone so unlike himself in reality. If he cannot be superior or fit in in the real world, he can certainly be superior in his fictionalised one.

Rather than creating a character of Jill for Warner's entertainment, Kemp seizes his opportunity to present himself as the version he is desperately trying to be for Warner. After five attempts, he finally writes the sort of letter he envisages his imaginary sister might like to receive:

> *Poor Christopher, for instance, with whom I share these rooms, is pathetically dependent on me for his weekly essay […] Yesterday it was after tea and I still hadn't made the least sign of putting pen to paper, so he began to get restless. 'Look here, what about that essay?' 'Yes, yes, in an hour or so, I haven't thought out the ending yet.' 'Come off it, damn the ending, I want some solid dope!' 'My dear Christopher, you shall have it by ten o'clock.' 'Ten! But I shall be drunk by then!' I pointed out that it was his affair and not mine*. (p. 130)

The letter does reveal some biographical details in that Christopher *did* have an essay to submit, Warner *did* ask about it, and 10 o'clock *was* the agreed time (p. 129) – these are factual details of Kemp's life, as revealed in the novel, if we were to study a letter like this biographically. However, the letter also allows Kemp to add fictionality to it: In reality, when Warner inquired about his essay, in the novel, the situation was more intimidating for Kemp than he admits in the letter he has written: Warner demands that the essay needs to be completed tonight, before ten o'clock as 'that's damn late'. His 'broad shoulders filled the light' and his face 'tightening to deliver a blow' (p. 128), intimidating Kemp to the point of fear. Rather than patronising 'dear Christopher', as he writes in his letter, informing him that it was Warner's affair and not his own, Kemp was submissive in reality and agreed to write the essay immediately. This interweaving of biographical and fictional details in the letter is evidence of how letters can act as portals allowing Kemp to live between two worlds – allowing him at once to draw on his real-life experiences but also embellish the detail depending on how he wants to present himself. In Kemp's case, whilst he may no longer be writing in the hope that Warner will read the letter, the character he constructs of himself for Jill is invariably based on the real Warner, nonetheless: 'Christopher had been the mainspring of the idea' (p. 133). Kemp constructed his persona in the letters based on who he wants to be – someone like Warner – and writing the letters to Jill allows him to live vicariously in that life, in that creative world that he constructs, where he can live up to the ideals of Warner's life and not be kept on the side-lines.

Magaretta Jolly and Liz Stanley adopt an interesting approach to letter writing: 'it is not to say that letters are deliberate lies, although we might want to be suspicious of the assumption that they are spontaneous outpourings of the true self' (Jolly and Stanley, 2005, p. 93). We are tempted when reading Kemp's letters to his imaginary sister to assume that they tell us

Kemp's deepest desires and insecurities about himself as he longs to become a more obnoxious, confident and popular Oxford scholar. However, Jolly and Stanley remind us that we 'need to see the subtle interchange between fantasy, writing and relationship' (p. 93). Using Kemp's letter writing to his sister, Larkin is identifying to the reader that letter writing allows you to, firstly, live in a fantasy world, and secondly, give you the opportunity to explore writing in a creative way. However, it also identifies the importance of the relationship between the writer and the recipient – as Jolly and Stanley note. Although Jill is a fictional construct of Kemp's, she is based on the people around him and therefore his letters express a desire to fit into that world. The letters are not necessarily the truth of who Kemp is, or a psychological outpouring of his deepest fears. Rather it is that the epistolary act allows him to alternate between who he presents himself as in reality and who he constructs in the imaginary. As the novel continues, we soon find out that these opposing personae tend to contradict one another, leaving Kemp unable to successfully fulfil either role, despite his desire to fit in.

Kemp continues to live in and out of his fictional world where he finds social acceptance: 'I can't say I found any difficulty in making friends here' (Larkin, 1964, p. 132) he writes as he recounts his own version of his first meeting with Warner and his friends, Eddy, Patrick and Elizabeth Dowling. Once again, he presents himself as superior: 'There were Chris Warner and the two Dowlings (the girl attractive in a cheap kind of way), an awful ass called Eddy and another quiet nondescript called Hugh Stanning-Smith, and they were all wondering what to do about tea' (p. 132). Indeed, these are real people in Kemp's life and are people who influenced the persona he uses when writing to Jill. This attitude towards letter writing that Larkin unveils through the character of Kemp questions the very basis of how we read letters: how often do letter writers adapt themselves to suit their reader, and more

importantly, how can we tell which aspects are true and which are fictitious? For Kemp himself it becomes difficult to tell the difference.

As he becomes more immersed in his imaginary world with Jill, Kemp longs to implement her into reality with disastrous effects. In the library, he spies a younger woman whom he recognises as his own caricature: 'he saw Jill':

> It was not a question of thinking: that girl is something like Jill. There was nothing casual in the resemblance: it was so exact that for a second his mind could not remember who it was, this over-familiar face. And he was too bewildered to think as the realisation came upon him. (p. 156)

By seeing his Jill, a young woman, who is in fact called Gillian, Kemp arrives at the realisation that the two worlds cannot collide. As she leaves the library, Kemp is so unwilling to return to reality that he 'automatically ran after her, pelting as hard as he could go' (p. 158). Like Marie in *Michaelmas Term at St. Brides*, if losing Jill was Kemp's reality, then he, too, would rather keep in the story. The removal of Jill removes Kemp's feeling of superiority that his letter writing to her provided. Therefore, he continues to attempt to have her in his life despite the fact that in reality, this version of Jill (Gillian) can never live up to the one he created for himself – not so much because of who he wants *her* to be, but of who Jill allows *him* to be.

Kemp longs to feel superior to his college contemporaries, but he will always remain on the outside, pushed aside by his lack of confidence surrounding women and sex. The first time the topic of sex is discussed between Kemp and Warner is before a date with Elizabeth: 'First time with her. That surprises you, doesn't it? You aren't the only one' (p. 168). Warner continues to assert his male dominance in the subject by patronising Kemp: 'Girls are queer about that sort of thing, as you'll find out, my lad' (168), before asking him to leave the room

before Elizabeth comes over. Kemp broods over this conversation recognising that he will never be Christopher Warner:

> What shocked him (for he felt shocked) was the enormous disparity he had stumbled upon between his imagination and what actually happened. When he thought of Christopher in his dressing-gown, legs straddling, his hand steadily working the razor and talking reflectively about what was going to happen, he knew with a sickening certainty that he could never sustain that position; that he would, in fact, turn and run long before it came. Even now he had turned and run, run away from that room, although he knew that he would think of nothing else all day, and in all conscience it had little enough to do with him. If this was what his quest for Jill was leading to, he would give it up without a second thought. (p. 170)

This disparity is reinforced between not only Warner and Kemp, but also Eddy and Patrick Dowling. When Kemp convinces himself that the real-life Gillian, Elizabeth's cousin, is in fact his own imaginary Jill, the boys conclude that sex is Kemp's primary motive – rather than a mere desire to fit into their world. When they challenge Kemp's crush on Gillian, bravado supersedes all of his genuine affection: '"Lord, it's cut and dried, isn't it? Cut and dried," said Eddy, belching. They poked him in the ribs with their laughter, slapping him on alternate shoulders to keep the joke going, buying him another drink. "Here, give him a gin in it," said Patrick again. "Give him a bit of Dutch"' (p. 186). After weak objections by Kemp that the pair had the wrong idea, the masculine smacking of the shoulders develops into further teasing over Kemp's supposed lust: '"Lord, the man was giving her the once-over at tea yesterday all right. Eh, Pat?" Eddy winked. "Foam dripping from his jaws," nodded Patrick. "Slavering at the chops"' (187). Admitting defeat, Kemp plays along with the joke: 'One on each side of him, John [Kemp] cautiously responded to the rhythm of their laughter, for his true feelings had shrunk away and he had seen them safely locked up. "Whose room can I have," he laughed' (p. 187). Kemp's bravado role fooled both Patrick and Eddy as they were shocked by his reaction when Gillian rejected him; he was not, as the men portrayed, a Don Juan after sex, but rather he had genuine affection for her:

> John opened his mouth and made a queer noise: it began as a polite refusal, but owing to the fact that he had been breathing unusually, it ended as a semi-articulated cry, shaken with curious blubbering vibrato. He had not meant to utter it, but once he had done so it was of course impossible to remain in the room, and he crossed to the door and went out, leaving Patrick staring after him in mock (and the other two with real) surprise. (p. 202)

For the first time, Warner and Eddy realise that perhaps Kemp is not all he made himself out to be. Nor is he how he presented himself in his letters to Jill. Here we find a direct challenge to the persona he presents in his letters and to his male contemporaries: a sensitivity towards sex and women which is no match for the masculine attitudes found between the college friends whom Kemp tries so desperately to associate himself with. His ability to play a role in front of the boys, and indeed his presentation of superiority in his letters to Jill demonstrate a yearning in Kemp that he would prefer to share their attitudes. Perhaps momentarily he does, but it is to his own fantasy world that the creation of Jill in the letters allows him to escape. However, the real-life event of meeting Gillian drags him out of his imagination and forces him to live in the real world: one where Kemp feels the pressure to conform to masculine pressures but cannot fulfil that role completely. It is not that he is a fraud, but rather that he adapts his persona depending on who he was in company with – all in an attempt for social acceptance.

Larkin's first novel is saturated with his curiosity about letter writing and his preoccupation with the demands of masculinity during the 1940s. Yet the text is not considered when Motion explores Larkin's life and writing during that time, or when he explores Larkin's letters to Amis (which explore similar topics). In fact, what Larkin has to say about letter writing and women in his novel is completely overlooked in Thwaite and Motion's influential readings of his letters to Amis even though both were written at the same time. In Kemp's letters there is an overplayed masculinity which is only challenged by Warner and Eddie when reality starts to creep in. His letters do reveal biographical aspects of

Kemp's life, but they also reveal fictionalities at the same time. Larkin's own letters should be read in this light: not because Larkin is Kemp and Amis is Warner, but because Larkin's own letters demonstrate a drawing on some biographical details of his life whilst also illuminating a desire to step out of reality and impress his reader – particularly around the subjects of women and sex.

'It's gloriously perverted'

In 1956, Amis takes out a pen to reminisce about the epistolary relationship he and Larkin shared ten years earlier. He echoes what Larkin's novel *Jill* was telling his readers all along – that a correspondence is a performance, and in their case, a joke:

> Just spent most of a sodding good day reading your letters. As I came across each fresh scattered batch of them it was like getting my hooks on parts of an unpublished Isherwood novel of the GBTB [*Goodbye to Berlin*] period: don't mean the stuff was full of boy-horn or anything like that, o'course. Reading them made me feel happy and contented and as if I was doing something significant in a significant mode of existence, just like I felt, I remember describing to you, while reading Scenes from p[rovincial] life. Not that I wouldn't much rather have your letters than any amount of that old Hoff […] Anyway, it all made me feel like what a feast is awaiting chaps when we're both dead and our complete letters come out. Yours rather than mine, I fear. Still. Made me think we ought to try get back into something like my old, and I mean our old, tempo of screed-swapping. Shall try do this of my own back, any road (Amis to Larkin, 24 September 1956, Leader, 2000, pp. 478-9)

The joke was on readers such as Motion and Thwaite in the early 1990s when they failed to acknowledge the creative aspects pervading the Larkin-Amis correspondence. Amis could not possibly have foreseen the irony in his statement. What is stranger, however, is that not only did we have Larkin's first novel as evidence that Larkin's letters were not merely outpourings of the soul, but that we have an admittance from Amis that their correspondence was not to be taken too seriously. This is a printed letter in *The Letters of Kingsley Amis,* which was published in 2000, but it was not until the *Letters to Monica* that readers started to revise their conventional notions of Larkin the man (with the exception of Richard Bradford's

biography of Larkin in 2005). In the letter above, Amis not only compares their letters to fictional texts but asserts that he wants to keep up the 'screed-swapping' which is why the tone and content of their letters never changed tack. From the 1940s right through to the 1980s, Larkin and Amis continuously corresponded about women and sex, with Amis presenting himself as similar to Christopher Warner and Larkin empathising with the inexperienced John Kemp.

By his own admission, Larkin tells his readers that when he first met Amis, 'for the first time I felt in the presence of a greater talent than my own' (Larkin, 1964, p. 15). This feeling of inferiority is evident from the very beginning of their correspondence in that Larkin felt pressure to entertain Amis: both in literary ability and in content. Thus, Larkin's letters to Amis focused predominantly on women, sex and masturbation. The 'screed-swapping' between them starts out as poking fun at female names:

> Your list of unattractive female names was very good: I hate them all, with the possible exception of Elsie. What about Dorothy and Emily? They make me want to open my mouth and allow the muscles of my stomach to throw out what is left of the meal I ate last. But May is a hideous name too. 'I'm sorry, ole boy, but I can't swallow that one […] still I dare say the name on the bottle doesn't mean much, eh?' (Larkin to Amis, 1 September 1943, Hull History Centre Ref: U DPL/5/1).

> I don't really like the name Phoebe very much. And Eva. Christ!!! What about Eva? Surely I can't have missed that? No, I seem to remember it was in my original 3 (Larkin to Amis, 7 September 1943, Hull History Centre Ref: U DPL/5/1).

> Maud! God! Yes, that one had slipped my mind. And how about Nelly? (Larkin to Amis, 13 September 1943, Hull History Centre Ref: U DPL/5/1)

Firstly, Larkin's use of the phrase 'ole boy' – a phrase similar to 'old man' that can also be found in *Jill* (p. 187) - is clearly a form of self-mockery: not to be taken too seriously. He also adopts a pretentious Victorian dialect in an attempt to not take himself too seriously, or more importantly, have his reader take him seriously. Furthermore, the names he lists -

Emily, Dorothy, Elsie, Maud, May, Nelly and Eva – are parodic Victorian names and exaggeratedly old-fashioned. Eva, of course, was also his mother's name. The names listed are a joke between two young rebels who objected to the starchy sentimentality of the Victorians. As time passes, Larkin and Amis's letters shift from juvenilia to adolescent vulgarity:

> Mrs G[…] is that unbearable character, an interesting and irritating person, insofar as a stupid, lower-middle class woman can be interesting. Her main charm is that she rarely requires an answer. She maunders on about the most intimate details of her private life almost unconscious of my presence […] her irritating qualities are due, I suppose, to the fact that she hasn't been fucked for about 3 years and she has developed an almost sexual attitude for minor forms of vice such as swearing. She is always saying: 'I don't think you could shock me, Mr Larkin' & 'But I don't suppose I could shock you, either.' She tempts me to swear with the skill of a whore tempting a jaded business man. One 'bloody' I dropped in experiment nearly made her come with excitement (Larkin to Amis, 12 August 1943, Hull History Centre Ref: U DPL/5/1).

The correspondence echoes that of the conversations one can envisage Warner and Eddy having in *Jill,* with Kemp sitting on the side-lines trying to keep up. To reiterate, this is not to suggest that the novel is autobiographical, but the novel reveals attitudes towards letter writing and performance which we have seen Amis acknowledge in his letter to Larkin of 24 September 1956. Moreover, what is often forgotten when reading an edition of letters is that a correspondence is two-way. As pointed out by Magaretta Jolly and Liz Stanley, 'while the familiar letter may be valued for its personality, authenticity or intimacy, the meaning of those effects is specific not just to time and place but addressee' (Jolly and Stanley, 2005, p. 92). Larkin was not writing these letters in a vacuum, as Amis reminds us in his letter. The 'screed-swapping' was always a double act between the pair of educated writers.

Though willing to share details of his interactions with women, Larkin also prised them out of Amis in return. He longed for Amis to disclose details about his promiscuous relationships with women, which present Amis as his superior in terms of sexuality. In the early years of their epistolary relationship, Larkin pleaded with him: "I wish you would be a

little more explicit and not make mysterious remarks" (Larkin to Amis, 25 August 1943, Hull History Centre Ref: U DPL/5/1). And, of course, Amis played ball:

> During the past week I have been trying very carefully and slowly to work out what I would really like to happen to me with sex. I have got as far as deciding on the preliminaries: a girl of 13, starting with her school hat and rain coat, takes off all her clothes while I sit back and watch. She is rather shy, and blushes and looks down a good deal, but she is also very glad to be doing it and smiles and looks shyly at me. When she is naked, she comes and stands over me, her hands behind her back, very red but still smiling faintly. I haven't worked out what comes next. Have you? (Amis to Larkin, 6 February 1947, Bodleian, Ref: Mss. Eng c.6044-6054

This letter is interesting in that Amis is very explicit about the fact that he is fantasising about a minor, yet, after the publication of *The Letters of Kingsley Amis,* his reputation was not derided in the same regard as Larkin's. That aside, the letter demonstrates a playing up to one another which echoes Kemp's desire to produce material that would intrigue Warner. However, the last sentence of this letter is crucial in exposing that their correspondence was more of a role play rather than a demonstration of who they really were. Here we have two writers, the first one (Amis) sending a letter to the other (Larkin). Written almost as a scene from a prose text, Amis explicitly presents his sexual fantasy to Larkin. He presents the scene leading up to what he would actually like to 'happen' with sex, but rather than disclosing that information he decides to get Larkin to participate in creating his sexual fantasy.

In *Philip Larkin and his Audiences,* Gillian Steinberg (Steinberg, 2010, p. 50) accurately observes: "impressing Amis was rather important to him [Larkin], and undoubtedly Larkin believed that Amis would be impressed by sexual language and adolescent vulgarity." What's more, as Amis's letter above reflects, he knew that Larkin presented a version of himself that he knew would impress Amis. In fact, in his *Memoirs* (1991, 51), Amis describes their first encounter as rather the opposite to Larkin's: "Before I grew too fond of him to see him in any such light, Philip struck me as a little ridiculous in appearance, anyway outlandish, unlikely, on one's hasty summing up, to be attractive to girls". Larkin saw Amis as someone with a

"greater talent" than his own, but Amis saw himself as the 'Don Juan' of the friendship – once again echoing the Warner and Kemp dynamic – with Amis asserting his superiority in sexual appeal over Larkin. But he is also encouraging him to be more like him, and of course, Larkin appears to want to be – in the letters anyway. In *Jill,* Kemp exaggerates a popular and confident version of himself in his letters to Jill, including some embellished biographical detail but also presenting himself as a version that he believed would be accepted. Similarly, when we read Larkin's letters to Amis, we can gather some facts about his time in Oxford: we can read details about his novel writing and his complaints about writers, and there will be elements of truth in this. However, we also need to recognise the exaggerated versions of himself that he will have presented to Amis - either to be accepted or purely for entertainment. In fact, following his death, Amis spoke briefly about Larkin's presentation for him: He always pretended to be a very bad librarian, and never on duty, always late, never there when Sir George called up from the council chamber. In fact, he lied very much' (Eagleton, 1993). Though here Amis notes his presentation as a librarian, in his letters, often the exaggerated version unveiled itself through the overplaying of sexualised content – particularly around the subject of schoolgirls.

Discussing his novel *Jill,* in a letter to Amis, Larkin gives him a brief synopsis:

> I am at present engaged on the play-within-the play' i.e. the short girls' school story a character writes. This character wants to compile a complete dossier of the 15th year of the girl's life – an imaginary girl, of course. It will start with her changing her hair style from pigtails to a ribbon effect […] on her 15th birthday, and will end with her letters of thanks to relatives for presents on her *16th* birthday. In between will come several stories about her, her diary (great fun), some letters to her friends etc. and so on. Naturally, he meets a girl eventually who exactly typifies this creation of his and falls whop in love with her. (Larkin to Amis, 25 August 1943, Thwaite, 1992, p.64-5)

After this, Larkin concludes that the story is "gloriously perverted" (Larkin to Amis, 25 August 1943, Hull History Centre Ref: U DPL/5/1). Whilst some of the details Larkin had

shared with Amis are true, some of them are embellished to exaggerate the 'glorious pervertedness' of the story:

> With every half-hour that he thought about her, her image grew clearer in his mind: she was fifteen, and slight, her long fine dark honey-coloured hair fell to her shoulders and was bound with a white ribbon. Her dress was white […] she was a hallucination of innocence: he liked to think of her as preoccupied only with simple untroublesome things, like examinations and friendship. (Larkin, 1964, p. 135)

Whilst she *is* fifteen, as Larkin told Amis, and she *is* very innocent, the protagonist Kemp does not seek to exploit that innocence. Rather, it is characters like Warner and Eddy who view her in this way rather than Kemp himself. When Eddy is mocking Kemp for his crush on the young Gillian, Kemp defends himself to Patrick: 'Don't pay any attention to him […] he's got a crude mind. I'm not a damn baby snatcher' (p. 186). As they continue to taunt him, Kemp becomes at odds with the reality of who he is and what he truly wants, and his desire to be a part of their world: 'One on each side of him, John cautiously responded to the rhythm of their laughter, for his true feelings had shrunk away and he had seen them safely locked up' (p. 187). With the desire to fit into their world overshadowing his reality, Kemp finally laughs and asks, 'Whose room can I have?' (p. 187). What is interesting about this scene is Kemp's exaggerated masculinity to impress his male contemporaries which is echoed in Larkin's letters to Amis. Moreover, the content within the letters is also strikingly similar: fantasies of young girls, particularly schoolgirls, pervade the Larkin-Amis correspondence, especially during the 1940s.

Larkin and Amis appear to take pleasure in celebrating transgressive sexual energies; they are indulging in anti-social depravity. The two of them seem to find the topic worthy of consideration for decades in their letter writing, (not to mention the fact that the characters of Jill and Gillian in his first novel are both under the age of sixteen), and it became a lifelong foundation for their friendship. In the 1940s, Larkin writes to Amis:

> I hope the non-stop writing isn't getting you down: I like it very much because your letters are so well-written that they are a pleasure to receive: your letters are the most 'literary' of all the ones I receive – that is to say, everything in them is described instead of stated and so it is only occasionally that I realise that you mean this or mean that […] I am glad you like Brunette's poems: I think all wrong-thinking people ought to like them. I used to write them whenever I'd see a particularly ripe schoolgirl, or when I felt sentimental. […] writing about grown women is less perverse and therefore less satisfying (Larkin to Amis, 16 September 1943, Thwaite 1992, p.70).

Larkin is acutely self-aware about the offensive nature of their corresponding topic, acknowledging that only 'wrong-thinking people' would enjoy Coleman's poetry (and the content of their letters). He reinforces to Amis that it is not the type of poetry that would be accepted by a broader audience – the topic of schoolgirls would lend itself to the wrong audience. However, Brunette's Sugar and Spice poems – to which Larkin is here referring to – did not include content for 'wrong-thinking' people at all. More precisely, the poem he is referring to is 'Femme Damnees' a poem that explores a lesbian sexual encounter but not one that demonstrates pleasure to 'wrong-thinking' people; rather, it is a poem of great sadness, violence and humiliation: 'the only sound was the sound of tears' (Burnett, 2012, pp. 117, line 24). In the letter, Larkin deliberately chose to imply that the poem was for 'wrong-thinking' people to remain in line with the tone of the Larkin-Amis correspondence – exaggerating their masculinity to excess. In these letters, the only audience Larkin is concerned with is his friend Amis and the theme scarcely alters; even when discussing his own relationship with Ruth Bowman: 'The heart of my relationship is not perversion at all (I wish it were) but boredom and flattery' (Larkin to Amis, 9 August 1945, Thwaite, 1992, p. 104). Larkin discloses to Amis that when Ruth speaks about herself, he is 'bored'. However, when she talks about her childhood Larkin finds a way to spin this for Amis's attention: 'I am delighted to hear that she has begun to write a novel about her school days, with a lot of lesbianism in it' (p. 104). Whether or not this is true, or merely just a ploy for Amis's attention, one cannot know for certain. However, it does seem a coincidence that the theme of

schoolgirls (and lesbianism) seems to find its way into Larkin's letters to Amis in whatever capacity it can. Before concluding the letter, Larkin declares what he thinks of sex: 'I really do not think I shall ever get into the same bed as anyone again because it is so much trouble, almost as much trouble as standing for Parliament'. He then continues on a more derogatory note: 'I have formed a very low opinion of women and the idea of having one perpetually follow me about is wearisome' (p. 104). The amusing hyperbole and sexual innuendo of 'standing for Parliament' is obviously for Amis's benefit and not to be taken seriously. However, this letter has been drawn upon as supplying evidence of Larkin's misogyny. Interestingly, the lines which succeed it are often ignored: 'Indeed the only advance I ever made to a woman was productive of such scorching embarrassment that the wound is still rawly open' (p. 104). This sentence alone expresses that the problem with Larkin's sex life is not so much with the woman but with himself – quite similar to the theme explored through the character of Kemp. After a conversation with Warner about having sex with Elizabeth, Kemp brews over the fact that he would recoil from a similar situation. Once again, this element is overlooked when focusing on the letters between Larkin and Amis. Moreover, in this one small section of a letter he has mentioned perversion, sex and women – all topics which are present in almost every single letter written to Amis and clearly demonstrating elements of fictionality and exaggeration.

Amis' responses can be read as an invitation to indulge in this hyperbolic narrative. For example, in 1947 he sends Larkin a letter littered with obscenities: 'Her brain is smaller than mine. If she were an INSTANTEANOUS FUCK, things would be different' (Amis to Larkin, 17 September 1947, Bodleian, MSS. Eng C. 6044-6054), which is quickly followed by self-mockery: '('One of these days my friend, you'll realise that women weren't meant to just leap into bed with you anytime […] they're meant for things like companionship, and trust')'. As an objection to this comment, Amis continues down the path of lewd remarks: 'HE

WINKED HIS ARSEHOLE IN AND OUT AS HIS BALLS BEGAN TO INFLATE TILL THEY LOOKED LIKE A COUPLE OF CONCRETE KNOBS', before once again retracting: 'but we don't want to talk on unpleasant subjects, do we old boy? I'm getting better at this game' (Amis to Larkin, 17 September 1947, Bodleian, MSS. Eng C. 6044-6054),. Here, Amis is acutely self-aware of his unpalatable views about women. However, his continuous use of capitalisation (which can be identified with Larkin's similar usage) to signal absurd comments and mode of address is clearly deliberately mocking, as his use of the phraseology of an older generation (which is also evident in *Jill*), and sheds a significant light on the reality of their correspondence: exaggerated 'screed-swapping'. This is for the sole purpose of entertainment rather than a biographical outpouring of their thoughts on women. The noteworthy last line of the letter 'I'm getting better at this game' confirms for any reader of their correspondence that it was a role-play, one which they never quit. In fact, the themes follow through for decades, even in the late seventies and eighties. The content in their letters was never to be taken as seriously as Thwaite and Motion suggested.

By the late seventies, though the theme does not falter, the language of the letters begins to take a more juvenile stance: 'Where's all this porn they talk about? Have seen iij bummies and ij payres of Tittes since slapping my own money down' (, Larkin to Amis, 3 March 1979, Thwaite, 1992, p. 596). Interestingly, however, the exaggerated masculinity is much more obvious to the reader than it was during their Oxford years. Their own self-mockery pervades the never abandoned topic of schoolgirls:

> I mean I like WATCHING SCHOOLGIRLS SUCK EACH OTHER OFF WHILE YOU WHIP THEM, or
>
> You know, the trouble with old Phil is that he's never really grown up – just goes along the same old lines. Bit of a bore really (Larkin to Amis, 3 March 1979, Thwaite, 1992, p. 596).

The capitalisation obviously catches the attention of the reader, and more specifically, was used to grab Amis's attention, leaving the following lines overshadowed. But it is these lines that are the most significant: here Larkin caricatures himself, imagining someone making excuses for his behaviour, but, and most importantly, he also alludes to the fact that their correspondence is juvenile (hence his inability to grow up). Specifically, they seem to exist in a mutually agreed hinterland between responsible, adult sexuality and its risky, immature alternative. This is glaringly obvious, even in Thwaite's edition of *Selected Letters*, as he continues to choose letters of a similar nature: 'Why don't they show NAKED WOMEN, or PROS AND CONS OF CORPORAL PUNISHMENT IN GIRLS' SCHOOLS oh for God's sake Phil can't you NO I CAN'T' (Larkin to Amis, 28 October 1979, p. 609). Though these later letters clearly demonstrate a two-sided acknowledgement that their letters allowed them to enter a fictional world of excess masculinity, the fact that they arrive so late in Thwaite's edition is probably why they go unnoticed. By the time readers of *Selected Letters* have reached page 596, it is not unlikely that they will have already formed perceptions of Larkin from the earlier correspondence: a porn gawping, lesbian schoolgirl fantasist.

The self-mockery found in Larkin and Amis's letters is not only used to highlight their awareness of their obscenities, however. It is also a key element of their friendship. They made each other laugh and their private exchanges of jokes marginalised differences in personality that in other circumstances might have driven them apart. Unfortunately, in Larkin's letters, it is, and was, possible to miss the comedy. In his interview with *The Observer*, Larkin (Larkin, 1982, p. 47) makes an interesting comment regarding his humour: "I like to think of myself as quite funny, and I hope this comes across in my writing". However, as the reviews of *Selected Letters* revealed earlier in this chapter, Larkin's humour is not always well received by the public. Nevertheless, it was well received by Amis who always found Larkin's letters very entertaining. He confirms his appreciation of their

correspondence in his *Memoirs*, describing Larkin as 'the most enlivening companion I have ever known and the best letter writer; to the end a glimpse of the Hull postmark brought that familiar tingle of excitement and optimism, like a reminder of youth' (Amis, 2004, p. 58). Indeed, 'youth' is the most appropriate word that Amis could have used to sum up their correspondence. In fact, Amis himself described their 'lifetime correspondence' as 'sheer childishness' (Steadman, 2003). This is echoed by the fact that the letters are always ended with the signatory 'bum'. This not only reflect the juvenilia of their letters but transports them out of a biographical realm into their imaginary world of youth. The themes and language used in their letters, , is certainly one of a juvenile nature. Even in 1983, Larkin is still using words such as 'minipops' and teenypoppers' (Larkin to Amis, 27 March 1983, Hull History Centre) when discussing schoolgirls. The letters clearly were a blend of fictionalisation with a pinch of biographical detail and demonstrate how Larkin, like John Kemp, wanted to live both in and out of reality and created fictionalised worlds with his addressee.

Had Motion continued with his train of thought that Larkin put on a 'bloke-ish' persona for Amis, then readers might not have read this correspondence with such disdain. When both sides of the correspondence are explored, it becomes glaringly obvious for the reader that these letters should not be used as factual evidence into Larkin's deepest inner thoughts of his years at Oxford, his relationships, or indeed his attitude towards the opposite sex. They should only be considered for what they are, what Larkin's first novel tells us they are: a tremendous mixture of truth and fiction. Whilst they illuminate biographical information on Larkin's life, they were predominantly created solely for the purpose of entertaining his reader, Kingsley Amis.

If further evidence is required of Larkin's desire to impress Amis, we only need to look at Larkin's letters to some of his female correspondents. Larkin's envy of the life that Amis had

in comparison to his own is startling. In his letters, his envy first appears to lie predominantly with Amis's talent: In 1958, he writes to Patsy Strang:

> I've been curling up with 'the new Amis' recently – it makes *me* laugh […] I am a corpse eaten out with envy, impotence, failure, envy, boredom, sloth, envy, incompetence, inefficiency, laziness, lechery, envy, fear, baldness, bad circulation, bitterness, envy, sycophancy, deceit, nostalgia, *et cetera*. (Larkin to Strang, 16 January 1958, Thwaite, 1992, p. 283)

The repetition of 'envy' towards Amis's literary text cannot be ignored. However, his jealousy towards his contemporary stretches beyond literary ability and into the life that Amis was able to live: 'I had an indecisive Easter holiday, including 2 nights at Swansea […] as the consequence of his having more money seems to be that we all have to spend more. I was also jealous of his success' (Larkin to Strang, 29 April 1954, Thwaite, 1992, p. 226). To his close friend, Judy Egerton, Larkin confesses a feeling of inferiority towards Amis: 'Glad you liked *Toads* – it was sincere, I thought, but failed to grip. I see K. Amis keeps his toads in better order! Of course, I'm eaten out with jealousy of him (Larkin to Egerton, 22 February 1962, Bodleian, MS.Eng , c.7453). To Barbara Pym, rather than an overt jealousy, he takes a subtle jab at Amis: 'I had a guilty squint at the new *Ox Dict Quotes* the other day – I am in, but with five, rather, no, not entirely predictably things […] poor Kingsley has only one, and that 'More will mean worse' (Larkin to Pym, 1 November 1979, Thwaite, 1992, p. 610). This letter illuminates the ongoing competitiveness between the pair as Larkin concludes that he never 'searched beyond' (p. 610) his and Amis's names when having his sneak preview. Furthermore, when writing his own poetry, Larkin tells Strang that Amis's superiority still has influence: 'I sometimes read a poem over with a tiny Kingsley crying *How d'you mean?* In my mind at every unclear image, and it's a wonderful aid to improvement (Larkin to Strang, 3 February 1954, Thwaite, 1992, p. 223). As we know, the letter intertwines fact and fiction, and this must still be taken into account when reading the letters about Amis.

Therefore, I am not arguing that these letters reveal Larkin's true feelings towards Amis but rather that they continue to echo the persona and role that he played in his correspondence with him. Moreover, this theme of competition between two men can be seen in his novel, his letters to Amis and now in his letters about Amis. It is something that we must consider when reading Larkin's letters, particularly to men – Larkin's prose and biographical writings convey a consistent desire to use the letter as a platform to reinvent yourself and be able to live in a world that reality does not allow you to fully live in. Moreover, this theme is transferred across into his poetry and nowhere more so than in his poem 'Letter to a Friend about Girls' – to which I shall now turn. It is a poem that demonstrates an envy to live in another world and how the epistle allows you to imagine you are there, even if reality is lurking nearby.

'Letter to a Friend about Girls': Revisited

After exploring Larkin's letters to Amis, it is important that we explore a poem so often associated with their friendship: 'Letter to a Friend About Girls'. Janice Rossen notes that in the poem, 'the poet regrets his comparatively unsuccessful attempt to seduce attractive women' (Rossen, 1989, p. 76); James Booth, although he does not conflate poet and speaker, nevertheless also provides a biographical interpretation of the poem itself:

> 'Letter to a Friend about Girls', completed in 1959 […] shows a relaxed attempt to ironise the pattern of his own personal sexual history in terms of the comic categories of Amis's fiction. At last, Larkin confides, he has realised his friend's secret. They are, and have always been, on different planes of existence. (Booth, 1992, p. 115)

In his more recent book on Larkin's photographs, *The Importance of Elsewhere*, Richard Bradford asserts that 'Letter to a Friend about Girls is 'the most significant poem to remain unpublished in his lifetime' (Bradford, 2012, p. 155). In his biography in 2005, Bradford explores the posthumous poem and, for him, the topic of the poem was sex, 'but its far more intriguing subtext involved Larkin's response to his friend's letter of 24 September 1956'

(Bradford, 2005, p. 174) – that friend, of course, being Amis (the letter itself will be drawn upon in my reading of the poem below). However, John Osborne disassociates the poem entirely from Larkin's life arguing that 'at a stroke, a floating text, unanchored from certitude, rife for interpretative play, which mentions neither Larkin nor Amis, has been closed down into a letter from one to the other' (Osborne, 2008, p. 170). Osborne seeks to discredit the biographical readings of the poem as it 'minimises the textuality of a text which is at considerable pains to have its literarity acknowledged' (p. 170). However, the reading of this poem should stand midway between biography and literature. By this I mean that Larkin's letters to and from Amis *do* reveal something about the content of this poem, just as Kemp's letters to Jill reveal some biographical information about Kemp's life. Nonetheless, as Osborne accurately observes, the very title of the poem 'invokes three entire literary genres – namely, the genre of letters, the genre of the epistolary novel and the genre of the verse epistle' (p. 170). As we have explored, the epistle is not entirely trustworthy, and therefore, though the poem itself may contain biographical content, it cannot be read entirely as an insight into Larkin's inner thoughts and feelings, or indeed his life more generally. 'Letter to a Friend about Girls' is less about Larkin's feelings towards his friend Amis, or his feelings towards women; rather it is another fictional construct of Larkin's. This verse epistle allows him to explore the theme of not fitting entirely into reality and the internal struggle that coincides with that. It is a representation of one's frustration with their inability to fit into a world to which they do not belong – a theme Larkin began exploring as Brunette Coleman and in *Jill*.

The title of the poem is misleading in that it gives the impression that the predominant focus is on girls. However, the poem is not about the *speaker's* – not the poet's – attitude towards females. Rather, the poem is only about girls insofar as girls signal his frustration with the very different life his friend is leading. The predominant focus of the poem is how

the speaker addresses his own sense of inferiority towards his companion and by composing a letter which reveals his resentment towards his friend's life. The poem opens with this comparison between the speaker and his friend: 'After comparing lives with you for years / I see how I've been losing' (Burnett, 2012, pp. 299, lines 1-2). Immediately we recognise the speaker's feelings of inferiority – an inferiority that becomes most prevalent when he compares how both of them interact with women: 'I've met a different gauge of girls from yours' (3). Not only does the speaker recognise his own inferiority; he also acknowledges that his friend is aware of his superiority: 'your mystification at my fecklessness' (6). Immediately we recognise the echoes of the Larkin – Amis dynamic. However, we can also see resonances of Kemp and Warner's friendship in *Jill*, as the speaker vents a similar frustration to that which Kemp vents in his letters to Jill – that frustration mainly lying with the fact that their two separate worlds cannot collide. Kemp could not compete with Warner just as this speaker cannot live the life of his friend, as 'everything proves that we play in separate leagues' (7).

The second stanza continues with this comparison as the speaker admits to his correspondent that 'now I believe your staggering skirmishes' (11). This line is particularly revealing in that it reinforces the recognition of a writer's ability to exaggerate and present a 'better' version of themselves in a letter - and that our speaker was not always entirely convinced about his friend's stories. The following lines, 'The wife whose husband watched away matches / while she behaved so badly in the bath' (13-14), do indeed echo a letter Kingsley Amis sent to Larkin, as Bradford accurately notes in his biography:

> In the letter which prompted the poem Amis had told of how he was 'getting tied up with a young woman here, not to say really tied up, just started fucking her what…', an arrangement scheduled by her provision of the fixture list of the Swansea Rugby Football Club and marked with matches to be attended by her husband. (Bradford, 2005, p. 175)

While Amis's influence over the poem cannot be ignored, the poem's status as a verse epistle also comes with the recognition that fictionalisation also comes within a letter. In Kemp's letters, letters contain both fact and fiction and, therefore, in this poem the reference to Amis is a representation of facts but equally it is a literary construct and cannot be read entirely biographically. The focus of the stanza is less about Larkin's relationship with Amis, more the desire to live in a world different from one's own, 'and all the rest who beckon from that world' (Burnett, 2012, pp. 299, line 15) – a world the speaker envies; a world where his friend can 'seek to find' girls and 'nobody gets upset or seems to mind'; a world which the speaker can only live vicariously in through his friend. To pin down the reading of this poem as a complete representation of Larkin's friendship with Amis would be inaccurate. The theme of comparing one life to another, and the desire to try to live in someone else's world will undoubtedly have been influenced by Amis, but Larkin's poem is not based on any one person.

By the third stanza of the poem, the speaker demonstrates a further frustration: not only does he envy the life of his friend, but he also recognises that this envy is not returned. Once again, we echo the Kemp and Warner dynamic. This section of the poem is riddled with self-deprecation as the speaker sardonically asks his friend: 'But equally, haven't you noticed mine?' (22). The entire poem is based on the fact that these two friends are not 'equal', and the speaker already knows that his addressee does not envy his life. Seething with self-deprecation, the speaker uses his opportunity in this letter to tell his friend about the 'birds' he 'bags' (10): 'the girls who go quite rigid with disgust / At anything but marriage' (27-28). He envies his friend's ability to bask in promiscuity whilst he is inevitably condemned to a life of miserable matrimony:

They begin
Fetching your hat, so that you have to lie

Till everything's confused: you mine away
For months, both of you, till the collapse comes
Into remorse, tears, and wondering why
You ever started such boring barren games. (29-34)

The speaker evidently does not believe in marriage which makes his resentment worse as even though he desires to live in a promiscuous world, he finds himself to be the one that women want to marry – which will only end up in tears and emptiness. It is unsurprising that this poem, and particularly this stanza, echoes the tone of poems such as 'Self's the Man' and letters and interviews where Larkin demonstrates a distaste towards marriage. However, to paraphrase Osborne, to interpret the speaker of the poem as the author is to put a limit on it.

The ending of the poem once again returns to the theme of separate worlds: 'But there, don't mind my saeva indignatio: / I'm happier now I've got things clear' (35-36). The juxtaposition of his contemptuous rage with the ironic 'happier' only reinforces the speaker's resentment towards how girls interact with his friend and not him. More importantly, 'happier now' suggests that this is the first time the speaker has confessed this inner jealousy to his friend and the first time he has presented this version of himself in a letter to his friend about girls. Like Kemp in *Jill*, the speaker has come to the realisation that despite his attempts, he cannot live fully in his friend's world: 'It's strange we never meet each other's sort: / There should be equal chances, I'd've thought' (37-38). In the past, perhaps, in their correspondence, the speaker did feel as though he was part of that world – just like in his letters to Jill Kemp felt a part of that world; but reality reminds us that the person we present in our letters is not entirely who we are. As the poem ends, the speaker returns to the epistolary theme:

Must finish now. One day perhaps I'll know
What makes you be so lucky in your ratio

-One of those 'more things', could it be? Horatio. (39-41)

The speaker ends his verse epistle by returning to the main difference between them: girls. He is aggrieved by the number of women his friend is able to interact with compared to him. However, this is not the only distinction between them; rather it is simply another 'thing' that his friend seems to be better at than him – reinforcing his feelings of inferiority. Moreover, this line echoes lines spoken by Shakespeare's Hamlet – 'there are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy' (Shakespeare, 1992, pp. Act 1, Scene 5, Lines 2-3), suggesting that the speaker believes that his friend fields some kind of unexplained magic over women. This literary allusion is further emphasised by the signatory 'Horatio', who was Hamlet's faithful confidant. Horatio was a character in Hamlet's story – he was in the background, just like the speaker of Larkin's poem lives in his friend's shadow. Furthermore, Horatio was predominantly seen as the trustworthy friend just as the speaker here is seen not only by his friend but by women as reliable and more suitable for marriage. By calling himself Horatio, the speaker is admitting to his friend that he knows his role in their story. As Bernard F. Scholz recognises: 'the prospective writer of a letter has two choices, the first concerning the kind of letter which will suit the chosen role' (Scholz, 1996, p. 136). Here, in Larkin's poem, the speaker has chosen to present his friend as superior. 'The second choice', write Scholz, 'more fundamental than the first [is] concerning the role he / she wishes to adopt' (p. 136) – here, Larkin's speaker chooses the role of Horatio, the inferior to Hamlet. This literary allusion to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* shifts our reading of this poem further away from the biographical and pushes us into the realms of fiction. Moreover, Osborne argues that not only is the 'Horatio' reference a nod to Shakespeare, but also to T.S Eliot's Prufrock:

> No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;
> Am an attendant Lord, one that will do
> To swell a progress, start a scene or two,
> Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,
> Deferential, glad to be of use,

> Politic, cautious and meticulous;
> Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;
> At times, indeed, almost ridiculous –
> Almost, at times, the Fool. (Eliot, 1969, p. 16)

Indeed, the speaker of Eliot's poem does echo the speaker in Larkin's: Horatio feels inferior in comparison to his popular pen-pal. He is seen as reliable by women; someone who can offer his friend advice and is glad to be able to, but ultimately Horatio is a lot more 'cautious' and 'meticulous' than his friend – a trait he resents. Moreover, just as Eliot's speaker feels like a 'Fool' at times, Larkin's speaker feels the same sense of ridiculousness as his friend is mystified by his 'fecklessness'. Ultimately then, as Larkin constructed the speaker of the poem as 'Horatio', he is evidencing that this verse epistle is a literary construct and not a biographical outpouring of his frustration at his and Amis's friendship. That is not to say that the biographical readings are entirely invalidated, as there is evidence that this poem was indeed influenced by Amis, but it is not a factual representation of their friendship. Just like Larkin's own letters, they do reveal something about his life, but they are not completely authentic as they, too, are literary constructs.

T.S Eliot wrote that it is 'better to confess one's weaknesses when they are certain to be revealed sooner or later, than to leave them to be exposed by posterity' (Eliot, 1965, p. 145). Interestingly, 'Letter to a Friend about Girls', reads as a poem which confesses one's weaknesses. However, the poem was never published in Larkin's lifetime and therefore was only exposed to posterity. This was no mistake: Larkin made a conscious choice not to publish. In a letter to Thwaite in 1978, Larkin considers what he wants to do with the poem:

> I read [the poem] with great interest, not having seen it for some years. My reaction was that in the first place it wasn't all that funny: very sad and true; in the second, that the 'joke' was neither too obvious or too subtle to be seen; thirdly that it could do with a bit of polishing up. But fourthly, I'm afraid, that it would hurt too many feelings for me to publish it. If it were simply a marvellous poem, perhaps I might be callous, but it's not sufficiently good to be worth causing pain […] we'll have to leave it until the posthumous volume. (29 January 1978, Thwaite, 1992, pp. 576-7)

Although Larkin did not publish the poem, he still wanted the meaning to be understood. Larkin knew that his letters would be published posthumously, alongside poems that were not published during his lifetime. On a first read of this letter, it would of course invite you to consider that the poem was indeed biographical with Larkin's concern over hurt feelings and admission that it is 'sad and true'. But whose feelings was he worried about? Amis'? Monica Jones'? Ruth Bowman's? Maeve Brennan's? Robert Conquest's? There are too many possibilities to pin it down solely to Amis. Moreover, what is the truth? Is it that Larkin truly felt inferior to Amis? Or does the truth lie with his recognition that we are all always playing in 'separate leagues'? In an earlier letter to Thwaite, Larkin jots down what he tells Thwaite is the true meaning of the poem:

> What it was *meant* to do was to postulate a situation where, in the eyes of the author, his friend got all the straightforward easy girls and he got all the neurotic difficult ones, leaving the reader to see that in fact the girls were all the same and simply responded to the way they were treated. In other words, the difference was in the friends and not in the girls. (Larkin to Thwaite, 19 March 1970, pp. 428-9)

Interestingly, in this letter, Larkin already separates himself from 'the author' of the letter in the poem. Further, he emphasises that this poem is not about the girls as such, but how interactions with the opposite sex only reminds the speaker that he lives in a very different world from his friend. We see this in *Jill*, when Kemp's lunch with Gillian ends disastrously as he tries too hard to be like Warner and ultimately fails. It is interesting, though, that even though Larkin knew the meaning he wanted to get across to the reader he chose to keep the poem veiled. This choice seems somewhat reflective of the speaker's intention not to send the letter to his friend about girls – in that Larkin's decision not to publish the poem is almost as though the speaker in the poem never sent the letter. The letter the speaker has composed reads as though this is the first time that he is willing to unveil this persona to his friend, who previously did not know this version of his friend but, he decides not to send it. If the speaker had sent the letter, then he would have to close the door on the world that his previous letters

allowed him to live in – a world where his friend was unaware how inferior the speaker truly feels. Therefore, by not publishing the letter, Larkin's speaker remains hinged between the fictional world his letters allow him to live in and the reality of the fact that he does not belong there.

By reading 'Letter to a Friend about Girls' in this way – as a letter which mixes truth and fiction – we ultimately develop a stronger appreciation for Larkin's own letters. In any instance where Larkin has employed letters into his fictional works – as Coleman, in *Jill*, or in his poetry – he demonstrates a clear awareness that the epistolary is a platform that allows you to take aspects of your own life and reinvent them in order to present a version of yourself that you wish the reader to see. Why then, should Larkin's own letters be read any differently? Larkin's letters to Amis clearly demonstrate a blend of fact and fiction rather than a clear-cut view of Larkin's views on women and young girls. To further evidence Larkin's manipulation of persona in his letters to Amis, it is now imperative that we draw not only on his fictional works, as I have done throughout this section, but to draw on the letters that Larkin wrote to the women in his life. We recognise in his letters that he presented an exaggerated version of himself when writing to Amis *about* women, but we must also explore how Larkin chose to present himself when writing *to* women. This is not necessarily just the presentation that he constructed with his most significant correspondences – Jones and his mother – but the women who should have been included in *Selected Letters* in the first place. These letters would have illuminated to readers that the Larkin we find in the letters to Amis is not necessarily the full picture. In fact, including counter-correspondences in *Selected Letters* would have served only to demonstrate further the fictional world that Larkin inhabited in his letters to Amis, and indeed all of his letters, much more clearly.

'Yours Affectionately': The unexpected persona

Before delving into Larkin's letters to women, it is important to reiterate that Larkin did not only create caricatures of himself for Amis, or men more generally. Nor is it the intention of this section to demonstrate that Larkin's letters written to women are true or indeed a more authentic version of Larkin the man. That is certainly not the case. Rather, the exploration of these letters is to give a voice to the silenced or underplayed persona from *Selected Letters*. It is a shift away from Thwaite's predominant focus on Larkin's letters to men, or in later years to Jones, and a recognition that Larkin was an avid letter writer who manipulated personae regardless of whom he was writing to. On one occasion he writes to Maeve Brennan that his letters to her 'are a charming excuse for not writing very much' (Brennan, 2002, p. 149). However, this is not entirely true. Larkin may not, at this particular time, have been writing poetry or novels, but he was certainly writing: he was constructing personae in his letters and creating characters and worlds for his addressee to step into with him. His letters contain as much literariness as his literary fictions.

The literariness in Larkin's letters to women is a lot more subtle than the hyperbolic masculinity that can be found in letters to Amis. However, many of Larkin's letters to women read as prose fiction, thereby removing his letters from the purely biographical into the realm of the literary:

> Dear Katherine,
>
> From the lawned quads of Oxford the sky is blue, slim clouds tinged salmon by the low sun in the east. Smoke rises from the chimneys and birds argue in the college garden. (Larkin to Kitty, 23 November 1940, Booth, 2018, p.28)

This letter, which was written to his sister in 1940, reads more like the setting of a novel than it does a letter from brother to sister. In fact, many of Larkin's letters written to women demonstrate a literariness – a use of descriptive language – that separates them from your typical letter, or indeed from his letters to Amis. To Barbara Pym, he writes: 'the New Year is horribly dirty up here – soot rains from the grey sky, mud splashes up from the scarcely

snow-free streets' (Larkin to Pym, 7 January 1965, Bodleian, MS. Pym 151). To Patsy Strang, rather than setting his own scene, he creates one for her: 'I imagine you curled up on that sofa in the window staring over the dipping country as the fat clouds drift by through the empty air. Is that where you settle? Or do you prefer the other room with the hatch on it?' (Larkin to Strang, 9 June 1953, Thwaite, 1992, p. 200). Like in the letters to Amis, and Kemp's letters in *Jill*, Larkin is once again using letters to try and be a part of someone else's world.

In order to create these separate worlds, it was important that Larkin got the tone right for each one: 'Has this letter struck the right note?' (Larkin to Strang, 25 February 1953, p. 194). In his letters to women, Larkin regularly apologises for writing what he considers to be a poor letter: To Maeve Brennan - 'This isn't a good letter, Dear Maeve' (Larkin to Brennan, 7 March 1961, Brennan, 2002, p. 149); To Strang - 'it was a choice of writing badly or not writing at all' (Larkin to Strang, 27 July 1953, Thwaite, 1992, p. 205).; To Pym – 'you will think I am a bad correspondent' (Larkin to Pym, 7 December 1963, Bodleian, MS.Pym 151); To Judy Egerton – 'After waiting in vain for the mood that I know will produce a readable letter' (Larkin to Egerton, 26 July 1962, Bodleian MS. Eng, c. 7453). His letters to women demonstrate a self-awareness suggesting that Larkin took exceptional care in how he presented himself: in 1949, he writes to Jones, 'I mention these things because I always believe in telling my correspondent what is around me in case it seeps into the text' (Larkin to Jones, 13 April 1949, Thwaite, 2011, p. 5); in 1952, he writes to Patsy Strang, 'these letters are difficult to write, aren't they, honey? There are so many styles to avoid' (Larkin to Strang, 24 June 1952, Thwaite, 1992, p. 185). However, once Larkin established his own presentation in the letters, he began constructing fictional worlds and inviting his correspondents to take part.

Larkin needed to imagine the setting of his female correspondents: 'Darling, I wonder if you are listening to *Twelfth Night*?' (Larkin to Strang, 23 July 1952, p. 186). To Barbara Pym: 'I should like to think of you correcting proofs all through the holiday' (Larkin to Pym, 7 April 1977, Bodleian MS.Pym 152). To Jones – 'Your life there has come into extremely sharp focus for me now: heating milk, singing in the kitchen, drying stockings, etc.' (Thwaite, 2011, p. 10). However, similar to Kemp, Larkin knew that these imaginative worlds were separate from reality. In his letters to female correspondents, Larkin regularly references the disconnect between the epistolary and the actual realms. To Judy Egerton, Larkin writes: 'I always enjoy your letters: they breathe a fine irony. There is always a little separation between you & your life implied' (Larkin to Egerton, 31 March 1963, Bodleian, MS. Eng, c.7453). He demonstrates sharp awareness of a writer's ability to veil or unveil aspects of themselves in their letters: 'I was pleased to hear from you, and hope it wasn't too much of an effort. It didn't read like it, but you are such a good writer you cd conceal such things! (Larkin to Judy Egerton, 15 February 1981, Bodleian, MS.Eng. c. 7459). Indeed, not only does he recognise each writer's ability to choose what they reveal, but he admits his own ability to conceal aspects of his own personality within the letter-writing personae he constructs:

> I'm sorry if my ponderous adumbrations(!) sounded melodramatic: all I meant is this: that our friendship, though successful, has been confined to a narrowish front, and if from that you've constructed an over-favourable image of me I do feel almost bound to say that to my mind you wd like me less – or think less of me – if you had the opportunity of learning my general behaviour pattern. (Larkin to Jones, 23 July 1950, Thwaite, 2011, p. 7)

This letter is most revealing in that it demonstrates Larkin's awareness of the disconnect between his letters and reality. David Barton and Nigel Hall assert that 'in letter writing there are distinct roles, beginning with the writer and the reader' (Hall, 2000, p. 7). For Larkin, as

the writer of the letters, he ordinarily chose to play the role of the affectionate companion and lover for his female readers.

Rebecca Earle acknowledges that 'personal correspondence may allow the writer to construct fictions of the self' (Earle, 1999, p. 2). To paraphrase Margaretta Jolly and Liz Stanley, that is not to claim that Larkin's letters to women are fabrications. Rather, as Earle also accurately observes: 'letters can provide access to aspects of personal experience that are not documented elsewhere' (p. 9). Indeed, this is particularly apt with Larkin's letters to women as many were not documented in *Selected Letters* or since. As with Larkin's letters to Amis, these letters are a blend of fact and fiction, unveiling a side to Larkin that was overshadowed by the misogyny found in Thwaite's edition.

In one important pocket diary note written in 1949, Larkin remarks that 'the whole business of sex annoys me. As far as I can see, all women are stupid beings. What is more, marriage is a revolting institution' (Motion, 1993, p. 119). However, in his letters to women Larkin evokes a very different tone to that found in this letter: a shift from contempt for, to respect towards, women. Larkin's letters to Maeve Brennan were not included in Thwaite's edition. However, when composing her own memoir of Larkin just over ten years later in 2002, Brennan revealed a version of Larkin that could not be found in *Selected Letters.* In 1961, after she visits Larkin in hospital, he offers an apology for his demonstration of affection: 'I hope I didn't embarrass you by my demonstration of affection when you went. You were looking so pretty & I was feeling so lonely that I found it hard to resist temptation. I promise not to do it again if you prefer not' (Larkin to Brennan, 12 March 1961, Brennan, 2002, p. 149). Here Larkin displays a thoughtful and emotional side as opposed to the disdainful one who thinks all women are unintelligent. Granted, the pocket diary entry and the letter written to Brennan are composed several years apart. However, the point here is not to prove that Larkin was not misogynistic, but to bring to the fore an alternative perspective.

In many of Larkin's letters to Brennan he continues with this affectionate tone: 'You were so sweet and loving I couldn't help losing some of the anxiety that has been riding me lately and felt *much* happier as a result' (Larkin to Brennan, 20 March 1961, p. 150). Moreover, not only did Larkin draw upon a caring persona, he also completely contradicts some of the letters he writes to Amis. As we explored earlier, after his meeting with Ruth Bowman and her cousin, Larkin hyperbolically wrote to Amis questioning, 'Don't you think it's ABSOLUTELY SHAMEFUL that men have to pay for women without BEING ALLOWED TO SHAG the woman afterwards AS A MATTER OF COURSE? I do: simply DISGUSTING' (Larkin to Amis, n.d., 1946, Motion, 1993, p. 143). However, to Brennan sex does not even become a consideration, let alone an expectation:

> It has meant a great deal to me to have your sympathetic letters. I don't connect them with flirtation or my taking advantage of you or you making yourself cheap or anything other cliché of human relations: they were just one person showing kindness to and concern for another. And this is a jolly rare thing in my experience. Thank you, dear, thank you with all my heart. (Larkin to Brennan, 18 April 1961, Brennan, 2002, p. 157)

Bradford notes in 2015, 'Maeve was, one would have thought, a very unlikely magnet for Larkin's attentions'. He continues that 'she was plain, bright enough but unsophisticated – she had not gone to university – and a practising Roman Catholic who treated the teachings of the church as inflexible truths and regulations, particularly regarding sex' (Bradford, 2015, p. 172). Bradford concludes, 'but this, perversely, was what attracted him to her' (p. 172). However, we must also consider how Larkin always adjusted his persona to suit his reader. Therefore, if Brennan was a practising Catholic then undoubtedly Larkin would have been aware that she would not engage in a correspondence discussing sex. In fact, he knew she would likely be horrified if she ever read Larkin's letters to Amis or any other of his male friends – and as on page 20, she was indeed shocked when she read Larkin's letters to Sutton. Brennan confirms to us that Larkin presented a version of himself in his letters to male friends that she did not

wholly recognise. Of course, as she explains, there were *some* characteristics that she could identify with the Larkin she knew. Therefore, she affirms that Larkin's letters were a blend of fact and fiction as no letter will have been written in a vacuum. In every letter Larkin had written, there will be similar characteristics, but we must be aware of the subtle – and sometimes not so subtle – interchange depending on his addressee. In the letter above, when Larkin reassures Brennan that he does not think she is cheap nor flirtatious, Larkin may have been overexaggerating this sense of sensitivity and respect in order to align with Brennan's own inflexible morals. Just as with Amis we recognise a hyperbolic masculinity, with Brennan there is an exaggerated gentleman. This tone continues as Larkin is careful to eliminate *most* sexual content from his letters to Maeve. In 1964, he signs off his letter by sending 'lots of kisses for your unique mouth, tender ones & not so tender ones. I hope you had a restoring holiday, & I look forward to seeing your clothes, and you' (Larkin to Brennan, 28 March 1964, p. 170). By referring to her clothes rather than her body, Larkin is careful not to border into anything that may upset Maeve. This is a stark contrast to the Larkin who wrote to Amis to tell him that he would 'give' all he 'possessed' to 'stick' his 'tool / Up the prettiest girl in Warwick King's High School' (Larkin to Amis, 8 October 1943, Motion 1993, p. 118). One year later, his tone does not alter: 'I was very pleased to have your letter […] it made me wish you were here, and stirred up all the semi-dormant imaginings I have about you & your personality, not to mention your person' (Larkin to Brennan, 29 July 1965, Brennan, 2002, p. 176). Despite the unaltering tone, it still appears exaggerated. The affection and regard for Brennan's feelings are clearly overstated in these letters and cannot be found in any other of Larkin's correspondences: '*Many* thanks, dear, for taking so much trouble when you were so hard pressed. It's *most* kind of you, and eloquent of that kindness of wch you are a luscious blend' (209). The only blend here is Larkin's ability to blend fact and fiction. That is not to say that his respect for her was not genuine. Rather, it is to reinforce that we must be aware when we

read Larkin's letters that the reader was always at the forefront of Larkin's mind. As Janet Gurkin Altman notes in her study on epistolarity, the most important aspect of the language unveiled in a letter is the recognition 'to which it is coloured by not one but by two persons and the specific relationship between them' (Altman, 1982, p. 118). Larkin's letters to Brennan tell us more about their relationship than they do about Larkin himself – in fact they only further reinforce how Larkin always used the letter as platform to step in and out of his reality and enter a world where he was able to present a version of himself that would be entirely accepted by his recipient.

In his letters to Patsy Strang, Larkin once again adopts an affectionate, though slightly more subtle, role. In 1952, he sends her a compliment: 'as always when you are out of reach I am amazed by my good fortune that you were ever within it: I'm afraid I haven't always deserved it' (Larkin to Strang, 24 June 1952, Thwaite, 1992, p. 184). Rather than expecting 'sex as a matter of course', Larkin is demonstrating a sense of inferiority to Strang by complimenting her. Moreover, what is also interesting about Larkin's letters to women, and particularly those written to Strang, is that he evokes a certain neediness and fear of abandonment that is completely omitted in his letters to men:

> I'm not sure how I'll carry on without you. It's like being told that I have to go through the winter without an overcoat – all right *now*, but what about when it gets cold? So much of my content in the past two years was due to you. You are the sort of person one can't help feeling (in a carping kind of way) *ought* to come one's way *once* in one's life – without really expecting she will – and since you did, I feel I mustn't raise a howl when circumstances withdraw you, however much I miss you – it would be ungrateful to fortune, if you see what I mean… do you? At least, that's what I try to feel! But oh dear, oh dear! You were so wonderful. (Larkin to Strang, 6 August 1953, p. 208)

Once again, we cannot ignore the hyperbole and the prose of this supposedly personal letter. The dramatic sense of loss that is apparent in this letter echoes Larkin's performed inferiority

to Strang that he wanted her to believe he had. Interestingly, however, Larkin's letters to Strang differ from those to Brennan in terms of sexual content:

> I've been looking in my diary to see what I was doing this time last year. I recalled the black nightdress but I'd forgotten the butter and tinned peaches, also that I 'ate nothing' on Sunday ('through fear & lack of exercise & being shagged out'). (Larkin to Strang, 12 July 1953, p. 202)

Larkin and Strang evidently had a sexually active relationship. However, that is not the main reason as to why Larkin presented himself entirely different to Strang than he did other women in his life – particularly Brennan. In his letters to Strang, Larkin is at times more vulgar. Nonetheless, however, he does adopt an exaggeratedly affectionate tone in his letters to Strang that he would not pursue in his letters to men and therefore demonstrates that he was still considering his individual readers when composing a letter.

Larkin's affectionate letters do not stop with women he had romantic affairs with. In fact, one of Larkin's dominant correspondences was with his good friend, Judy Egerton. To Egerton, Larkin is affectionate in that he gives her a sense of superiority to him: 'I can't think why I impressed you so: you speak as if I'd been sick in my shoe or something: I thought perhaps I might have been a shade more conscientious than usual for this intelligent & attractive female, but that was all' (Larkin to Egerton, 21 October 1958, p. 289). He continues to compliment Egerton throughout their correspondence: 'it amazes me that anyone as nice and gifted as yourself shouldn't have the kind of life they deserve' (Larkin to Egerton, 17 February 1974, Bodliean, MS. Eng. c. 7457). This letter is particularly interesting in that some of it does appear in Thwaite's edition of letters. Larkin's comments on himself have made it into the 1992 printed edition. However, Larkin's affection towards Judy that we see here is omitted. This at the very least reveals the extent of the silent editing that took place in 1992. This small exploration of a cache of letters written by Larkin to women in his life

forces us to revise our conventional notion of Larkin's poor attitude towards women and recognise that we were not given all the facts in the first place. In another letter which has been left out of Thwaite's edition, Larkin once again shows an insurmountable affection towards his friend Egerton: 'my admiration for you knows no bounds' (Larkin to Egerton, 9 June 1981, Bodleian, MS.Eng. c. 7460). The exclusion of these types of letters from *Selected Letters* not only excludes Larkin's variety of persona but also distorts how we view him and his attitude towards women when we only see the derogatory and the obscene. This causes us to question what else has been left out of Thwaite's edition of letters.

On revisiting Thwaite's *Selected Letters*, it becomes clear that it was not only letters to Egerton that have been omitted. For example, Larkin was engaged in a frequent correspondence with his deputy librarian, Brenda Moon, and *none* of these letters made it into *Selected Letters.* Moon was not just a colleague from work but rather the two indulged in an epistolary relationship that covers the period in which she and Larkin worked together at Hull University from 1962-1979. Moon was a female friend and his letters to her demonstrate a high regard for her and their friendship. For example, following a car accident that Moon was involved in in 1970, Larkin expressed concern in his letter to her:

> I was deeply distressed to hear today of your accident: it must have upset you terribly, and I do hope you are recovered now. Don't hesitate to take time off to rest and regain your composure […] It is troubling that anyone as careful and reliable as you could have an accident. I would trust myself with you anywhere in a car, more so than myself even! (Larkin to Moon, 23 October 1970, Hull History Centre, U DX 257/14)

Elsewhere, after her father becomes unwell, Larkin writes a letter displaying an effort to provide emotional support: 'whatever happens you know that your father had a great deal of comfort and help from you, and his old age has been immeasurably happier in consequence.' (Larkin to Moon, 14 December 1978, Hull History Centre, U DX 257/39). In letters like this, we can see none of Jardine's 'throwaway derogatory remarks about women', only affection

and empathy. Indeed, Thwaite attempts to offer a justification for his exclusions in the introduction: 'I am aware of omissions other than those I have indicated already [Family / Bruce Montgomery / Monica Jones]. A selection such as this is a sample, not a comprehensive and definitive record' (Thwaite, 1992, p. xiv). However, he does not mention Moon at all. Granted, he did not correspond with her as often as he did Montgomery, Jones or his mother. Nonetheless, leaving letters of this nature out of the edition prevented readers from arriving at a balanced assessment of Larkin's personality as revealed in the letters.

It is important at this point to once again reiterate that I am not reading Larkin's more affectionate letters as true. Rather I am pointing to the fact that there are many letters of Larkin's out there that unveil a different persona to the one that we see in *Selected Letters* - or even in the later editions of *Letters to Monica* and *Letters Home* for that matter. We know that the affectionate side to Larkin that we see revealed in his letters to women is a persona, given that in his own letters he frequently apologises for not quite living up to the epistolary persona he carefully constructs in reality:

> I write nonetheless to repeat my regret at Thursday's debacle and to apologise for it. It was all so different from what I had imagined, yet looking back I now see how very improbable that was and how silly of me it was to think it could have been achieved […] perhaps when we feel better we can meet again. (Larkin to Brennan, 12 July 1963, Brennan, 2002, p. 158)

In the letters, Larkin is able to control how he presents himself and chooses to unveil an affectionate correspondent. Evidently, however, Larkin's physical interactions with women never quite seem to live up to his, or their own, expectations. Interestingly, however, this inability to align his affections in his letters with how he is in reality is much more prominent in his letters to long-term companion, Monica Jones. There we can see this affectionate persona carried through to their epistolary relationship and how Larkin can never quite live up to what he puts on paper:

> Oh dear! I do seem to have created a bad impression lately: I'm awfully sorry about 'hostility' […] it's quite unintentional & must spring from being a bit rushed & my

> natural sub-sarcastic way of talking sounding much nastier when written down. But trying to remember what I wrote doesn't enable me to recall any real hostile intention, quite the reverse. I thought recent letters had been confidential and affectionate. (Larkin to Jones, 20 November 1950, Thwaite, 2011, p. 20)

This letter was written to Jones very early into their epistolary relationship. However, it reinforces how Larkin wanted to be received by his recipient. He notes that the mistake in persona must have happened as he was 'rushed' and therefore did not construct his presentation as carefully as other letters. Moreover, he confirms to Jones that he wanted his letters to come across as 'affectionate' – just as he did in all his letters to women. Therefore, we cannot read Larkin's letters to Amis, or to Brennan, Strang, Egerton and Moon as biographical and apply that knowledge to our readings to Larkin's literary texts. Rather, we need to read Larkin's letters as literary texts in themselves and recognise that his letters were always a platform allowing him to step in and out of his own reality and become accepted in other worlds.

Conclusion

Part I of this thesis has explored some of the oversights and omissions in the editing of *Selected Letters*. Firstly, the fact of Thwaite's decision not to include any of Larkin's letters to female correspondents until 1951. Secondly, the decision repeatedly to include Larkin's letters to Amis and to omit affectionate letters to a range of female correspondents. This first edition of letters caused insurmountable damage to Larkin's reputation in the early nineties and was further reinforced by Motion's biography, *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life.* The most harmful damage caused by these ground-breaking texts was that *their* presentation of Larkin was transferred across to how people began to read and interpret Larkin's literary texts. Rather than presenting a 'new' version of Larkin, or attempting to defend Larkin – as Booth and others have done – Part I has focused less on Larkin's attitude towards women and more on his attitude towards letters *per se*. This attitude is most noteworthy in his fictional texts

such as *Jill* which offers up an original lens to reading Larkin's letters. *Jill* has been employed not to shed light on Larkin's Oxford years, but to highlight Larkin's curiosity with the epistolary during these formative years. Through a close analysis of *Jill,* we can recognise that for Larkin, the letter acts as a door which allows him to step in and out of reality. When we take this reading of the letters to Larkin's own correspondences, the fictionality becomes much clearer – particularly in regard to his correspondence with Amis. This exploration of wanting to live vicariously in another's world stays with Larkin as he continues to explore it in his poem 'Letter to a Friend about Girls'. Moreover, the inclusion of this poem in this section not only illuminates Larkin's manipulation of personae to suit his reader, but it allows us to explore the poem in a new light by turning away from our conventional notion that the poem is about 'girls', to the realisation that it is more about the act of letter writing itself. By drawing on Larkin's explorations of the epistolary through his novels, his own letters, his poetry, Part I has brought us finally to letters that have either been overshadowed or entirely excluded from the *Selected Letters*. We can recognise Larkin's 'Deceptions' in his letters more clearly. Therefore, the next part of this thesis will continue to consider the fictionality present in Larkin's letters, thus distorting how the letters were initially received by the public. Like *Selected Letters*, *Letters to Monica* presents version of Larkin that is emphasised by the editor. This time, rather than misogynistic, Thwaite presents Larkin as affectionate and caring. More importantly, they are considered to be more genuine and authentic. However, as I have argued throughout Part I, we cannot base our perception of Larkin on one correspondent. Rather, we should recognise his relationship with that particular recipient and explore how he adapted himself in order to suit that individual reader. Therefore, Part II will continue to focus on the imaginary worlds constructed by Larkin in his letters – which continue to be revealed in *Letters to Monica*.

Part II: *Letters to Monica*

Prelude

'Larkin's own reputation has forked extravagantly: among the reading public no poet is more admired, while among academics he is the subject of much disapproval, largely on account of the opinions expressed in the letters, themselves edited for academic consumption and, one assumes, largely ignored by those who stubbornly continue to admire the poems. Letters to Monica *is by far the most endearing volume of all those that have been posthumously published, whether by Larkin (verse, reviews, interviews, letters) or about him, in the form of biography and memoir'* (Lock, 2012: 182).

'Nearly 500 pages of misanthropy, glumness, cowardice and hypochondria (the only sort of prophecy that converges on the truth) from someone both spineless and prickly – it sounds like too much of a good thing, but Letters to Monica *offers a very full and satisfying portrait of Philip Larkin in all his (negative) moods'*. (Mars-Jones, 2010)

'He opened up to Monica, a woman as sharply funny as he was […] and there are moments of great tenderness and insight here, even if this was not a conventionally happy relationship'. (Lezard, 2011)

Introduction

Following the notoriety of the *Selected Letters,* there have been several attempts to redeem Larkin's reputation. A case in point is Maeve Brennan's *The Philip Larkin I Knew* in 2002. Brennan questions the version of Larkin that Thwaite portrayed in *Selected Letters*. In her memoir, she tells the story of how they met, their working relationship, divulges details of their romantic relationship and indeed the undesirable love triangle between herself, Larkin and Monica Jones. As a source of evidence, she includes around fifty letters written between herself and her thirty-year 'lover' in her appendices – all of which present a different version of Larkin than the Larkin scholarship had seen previously. However, despite this attempt, fifty letters written between Larkin and one female correspondent was not enough to counteract the overwhelmingly male dominated collection of correspondence found in the *Selected Letters*. Rather, it was only in 2010, when Thwaite published his second edition, *Letters to Monica,* that the original, and rather obscene, version of Larkin began to eclipse. On the paperback cover of *Letters to Monica* alone, we can identify words such as 'true',

'intimate' and 'affectionate' – all of which are a far cry from his previous labels as 'racist', 'misogynist' and 'bigot'. Part II of this thesis will focus on this second presentation of Larkin and his letters to Monica Jones. I will begin by exploring Thwaite's presentation of Larkin in *Letters to Monica* – as I did with *Selected Letters* in Part I – considering how this particular correspondence came to be considered to be the most honest reflection of Larkin the man. Given that these letters in particular were considered in this way, I will then sketch out Larkin's own critical landscape of letter writing (his explorations of other writer's letters and his opinion on the literary letter) to argue the unreliability of his own letters. In order to further emphasise the fictionality of letters, I will explore Larkin's second novel, *A Girl in Winter*, as a case study to demonstrate the separation between the imagined epistolary worlds and reality. This conflict between the fictional and the actual will then be used as a key to unlocking Larkin's letters to Jones where they, too, encapsulate a clear distancing between the fictional characters of Rabbit and Seal in their letters and the Larkin and Jones in their reality. Finally, I will return to letters written to Jones that initially appear biographical as they reflect Larkin's attitudes towards children that are found in his poetry and interviews. However, the focus of this will be once again to demonstrate that Larkin was presenting a version of himself to Jones that can be contradicted by his presentations to others. Therefore, the aim of Part II is to undermine the initial reception of *Letters to Monica* as revealing his private inner self and to argue that they present only the private epistolary world that he and Jones shared.

Editorial Statement: Larkin II

From the beginning of Thwaite's introduction to *Letters to Monica*, it is quite clear the type of relationship between Larkin and Jones that he wants to present to the reader: 'Apart from Larkin's family letters, chiefly those written to his mother for over thirty years of her widowhood, they form the most extensive correspondence of his life. Certainly, they mark his

most important relationship' (Thwaite, 2011, p. vii). For generations, letters between lovers have often been read as a means of getting to know the real person. Moreover, it is a convention that you bare your soul to your significant other as this is the person who knows us best. Thwaite draws on this romantic ideal in *Letters to Monica* and has presented Larkin's letter writing to Jones as the key to Larkin's soul - the most illuminating companionship in getting to know the real Larkin. He continuously draws on emotive language to convince the reader of the intimacy in their correspondence: 'It was to Jones that the dying Larkin entrusted the fate of his copious diaries ('Make sure those diaries are destroyed')' (p. vii). Thwaite not only reminds us that we do not have access to Larkin's own private diaries, but by placing this statement here he is subtly suggesting that these letters written to Jones, which have been selected and edited by Thwaite himself, are the next best thing to Larkin's private inner thoughts and feelings. His introduction is littered with phrases to persuade us to this thinking: 'they [the letters] chronicle his life and attitudes more intimately than anything else we have' (p. vii) and, 'it was to Monica that Larkin poured out his fears and miseries' (p. x). The reviews attached to the paperback cover alone evidently derive from Thwaite's hypothesis: William Boyd remarks, "The length and intimate nature of Larkin's relationship with Monica Jones gives the letters and the opinions they express a compelling authenticity and almost vulnerable honesty" (p. i); David Sexton defines them as "the most intimate letters of a major poet" (p. i); John Carey maintained that "Philip Larkin is the best-loved poet of the past 100 years, and these irresistibly readable letters reveal the life and personality more intimately than ever before" (p. i); and Rachel Cooke found them to be "funny, sad and true" (p. ii). The overall verdict was that our previous perceptions of Larkin as misogynistic and misanthropic had been revised, and that Thwaite had now uncovered the *real* Larkin.

What is most interesting about the reviews is how they reveal that readers are once again using a selection of letters as a full insight into the subject rather than a representation. In the

introduction to his *Selected Letters*, Thwaite notes his rationale for his editorial choices by telling the reader that they were 'a first presentation rather than a complete and exhaustive archive' (Thwaite, 1992, p. xi). Despite this comment, Thwaite predominately populates the edition with Larkin's letters to James Sutton, Colin Gunner, and Kingsley Amis. By doing so, Thwaite suggests to the reader that these were the dominant correspondents in Larkin's life, and therefore, the most important. However, almost twenty years later, Thwaite now presents *Letters to Monica* as in fact the most revealing of Larkin's inner self. Larkin scholars are then left to question, which edition or set of letters is more authentic? By prefacing *Letters to Monica* with an introduction that sets the scene for Jones as Larkin's trustworthy confidant, Thwaite is destabilising his first presentation in *Selected Letters*. Moreover, in doing so, I would argue that he is also implicitly undermining the authenticity of the letters to Jones because, as he presents an entirely different version of Larkin in 2010, he is actually highlighting Larkin's ability to adapt personae in his epistolary writing.

After establishing the importance of Larkin's correspondence with Jones, Thwaite informs the reader that he has not included everything:

> It was with Monica that Larkin shared the trivial details of his daily life – his hair, his health, his weight, his clothes, his hangovers, whether he needed to wash the car or put it away in the garage, the records he played, the programmes he heard on the radio […] I have included something of all of this, but have omitted much. (Thwaite, 2010, p. xiv)

After detailing to his reader what many of Larkin's letters include, Thwaite implies and reinforces, once again, that he has only excluded on the grounds of repetition: 'I have, I think, included something of everything, but in some cases I have chosen to give only a few examples of repeated themes and topics' (p. xiv). However, one topic which frequently pervades the edition is health, particularly ill-health. Not only does Larkin continue with his own hypochondriac moments of despair which can be found in *Selected Letters*, but in *Letters to Monica* he continuously enquires after Jones' health: 'I wondered if you managed

to go in today – I do hope you went only if you are well enough, or strong enough since I'm sure you wouldn't feel very well. You *have* had a bad spell of it' (Larkin to Jones, 10 February 1964, p. 324); 'Well, dear, how have you been this week? I should like to stroke your little rabbit brow & large rabbit hindquarters. I do hope you aren't getting influenza or a cold. Everyone here seems to have had a dose at some time or other' (Larkin to Jones, 18 January 1962, p. 289). The latter demonstrates not only Larkin's anxieties regarding her health, but also his anxieties surrounding sexuality. He verges on the topic when expressing a desire to stroke her, but this is quickly reverted when he makes reference to her having the flu. Indeed, letters of this nature display a stark contrast from the women-slanging obscenities that litter his letters to Amis. Time and again in *Letters to Monica,* we uncover a correspondence that looks like it is potentially of a sexual nature, but which is almost always replaced by intimacy and concern - ultimately convincing both Jones and readers of Thwaite's edition that it was with her that Larkin shared his deepest 'fears and miseries'.

When reading an edition which from the very first page repeats and reinforces the significance of this relationship between Larkin and Jones, it is no wonder that Thwaite's two sporadic comments regarding his omissions seem hardly relevant. Moreover, despite his endeavour to 'avoid' repetition, his repetition of the claim that these letters reveal Larkin's intimacy with Jones is certainly notable. Thwaite is very selective in what he duplicates and what he removes. In fact, his selection of letters coincides entirely with his representation of truth and intimacy between Larkin and Jones. Interestingly, this presentation of Larkin helps undermine Larkin's negative attitudes towards women and questions his misogyny: In his letters to Amis, Larkin often plays the role of a man suffering from sexual frustration due to the lack of women willing to sleep with him, 'AS A MATTER OF COURSE' (Larkin to Amis, n.d., 1946, Motion, 1993, p. 143). However, writing to Jones, his frustrations are quite the opposite:

> I think – though of course I am all for free love, advanced schools, & so on – someone might do a little research on some of the *inherent qualities* of sex – its *cruelty,* its *bullyingness,* for instance. It seems to me that *bending someone else to your will* is the very stuff of sex, by force or neglect if you are male, by spitefulness or nagging or scenes if you are female. And what's more, both sides *would sooner have it that way than none at all.* I wouldn't. And I suspect that means not that I can enjoy sex in my own quiet way but that I can't enjoy it at all. (Larkin to Jones, 1 November 1951, p. 67)

This one letter is just a snapshot of his letters to her. Indeed, they are littered with negative comments surrounding sexual intercourse. What is more, in this same letter, Larkin takes a jab at his Oxford contemporary: 'What I *remember* saying was that Hilly [Amis's first wife] must regret marrying Kingsley so early when she sees her sister married to a respectable husband who will (very likely) go far' (p. 68). As the cracks begin to form on the first portrait of Larkin – especially with regard to his relationship with Amis – it is becoming clear that Larkin kept Amis and Jones in two worlds that he separated through the epistle. Larkin and Amis' correspondence, in Part I, presents Larkin as a misogynist, whereas, here in *Letters to Monica,* which Thwaite categorises as revealing of an even more intimate relationship, Larkin's negative criticisms towards Amis when writing to Jones diverts readers' attention from the original 'boyish' correspondence and turns the focus to the Larkin presented to Jones. This ultimately leaves the content in the Larkin - Amis correspondence less convincing, while in the process his letters to Jones become more convincing. This aversion to sex can be seen again in a letter written in 1958, where Larkin appears to confide in his lover over his struggles with sex:

> I'm sorry that our lovemaking fizzled out in Devon, as you rightly noticed. I felt so tired each night through the relaxing air &, I suppose, *being on holiday* that the grasshopper became a burden very easily. And of course, qualify it how I may, I am *not* a highly sexed person, or, if I am, it's not in a way that demands constant physical intercourse with other people. (My handwriting is awful, unpractised.) I tire very easily & am always more prepared for sex in the morning than at night. I think sex is a very curious thing, a kind of symbol of things we should like to be true & aren't, like 'being together' and 'losing oneself'. At least I suppose we should like them to be true! A kind of double symbol that we aren't alone & that we aren't selfish. I suppose the fact that I can imagine these things is a clear indication that I don't appreciate the

> attraction of sex, wch is, what is *feels* like. Anyway, I'm sorry to have failed you! This is what depresses me: the enormous harvest-homes you deserve, the few stale, shabby crumbs you get. (Larkin to Jones, 2 August 1958, p. 239)

Though there is a detached tone in this letter as Larkin describes sex in the abstract rather than as something involving him, it does read as confessional, nonetheless. He discusses his disinclination towards sex, how it does not live up to the intimacy it is conventionally known for, and he apologies for his inability to satisfy his partner. This confessional nature would certainly persuade readers that it is here, in *Letters to Monica,* that the real Larkin is being truly unveiled. Indeed, his aversion to sex, with the lack of intimacy and unwillingness to 'bend someone to his will', are certainly not the letters we would have expected to find from reading the *Selected Letters.* As discussed in Part I, pornography and schoolgirls pervade the Larkin-Amis correspondence, but there is, evidently, a stark contrast between 'I like WATCHING SCHOOLGIRLS SUCK EACH OTHER OFF WHILE YOU WHIP THEM' (*SL*, 596) and 'I am *not* a highly sexed person'. There is a clear difference between the Larkin he presents to Amis and the one he presents to Jones. However, these letters to Jones are not any more genuine or authentic than the letters to Amis (in contrast to what Thwaite is suggesting in his introduction). Rather, they are only further evidence that Larkin used the letter to step out of reality by creating versions of himself to suit his reader. Here, with Jones, his persona is indeed more affectionate, caring and seemingly confessional than his presentation to Amis but we must bear in mind the role of the addressee, too. Larkin adapts himself based on his correspondent. He used the epistle to momentarily leave his own reality and step into their world which was achieved by presenting versions of himself that his reader would accept.

Thwaite's presentation of the Larkin-Jones correspondence laid the foundations for what was to follow. Just as Motion, in *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life*, backed up Thwaite in 1993,

so too in 2014 Booth continues Thwaite's hypothesis, determined in his biography to unveil the new and improved Larkin. In his introduction to *Philip Larkin: Life, Art and Love,* Booth immediately takes to task Larkin's previous notoriety: 'Larkin's reputation as a poet is secure. His reputation as a man is, however, in a less healthy state' (Booth, 2014, p. 6). Recognising that Larkin's 'fall from grace' came following the publication of Thwaite's edition of letters and Motion's biography, he observes that *The Independent* set the tone for the criticism which has since followed: 'Mr Nice tackles Mr Nasty' (p. 6). Whilst *The Independent* may have set the tone for critics to begin to defend rather than ridicule Larkin (as they did following *Selected Letters*), it was Thwaite's *Letters to Monica* that sparked a concerted revision. Booth's biography is a case in point. He begins his posturing of Larkin as 'Mr Nice':

> There is, of course, no requirement that poets should be likeable or virtuous. But we might ask whether art and life can have been so deeply at odds with each other that the poet who composed the heart-rendering 'Love Songs in Age', the euphoric 'For Sidney Bechet' and the effervescent 'Annus Mirabilis' had no emotions, or was a shit in real life. Larkin's negative public image is built neither on his poetry nor on the evidence of those who knew him well. Those who shared his life simply do not recognize the Mr Nasty version. (p. 6)

As evidence of 'those who knew him well', Booth lists thirteen people who were either romantically intimate, close friends, or work colleagues of Larkin's – all of whom, interestingly, share Booth's views. Whilst he does mention Anthony and Ann Thwaite, Judy Egerton, Winifred Dawson (Arnott) – who feature in *Selected Letters* – and Monica Jones, he does not include the dominant correspondences which influenced the early reputation: those with Amis, Sutton or Gunner. Though it is impossible to know what these three men may have said to Booth, their omission from Booth's list does weaken the authority of his argument. His biography has been set up as revealing the 'real' Philip Larkin yet, like Motion, Booth has chosen to focus on certain aspects of Larkin's life and attitudes and push others to the side. Though Motion focuses on the more unpalatable views of Larkin while

Booth shines a light on his more agreeable characteristics, both biographies draw on 'personal' accounts of Larkin and the letters Larkin had written. However, this study has continued to demonstrate the unreliability of Larkin's letters and recognise that these 'personal accounts' were based on how Larkin presented himself to others.

Before we go any further, it must be noted that Booth did acknowledge on several occasions Larkin's ability to adopt personae: 'Those who imagined that they knew Larkin tended only to see those aspects which suited their own conceptions' (p. 7). Booth recognises that Larkin played a role in his recipients' perceptions of him as he continues to argue, 'a key motive seems to have been the compulsion to express himself in the widest possible range of literary registers, from civilised formality to intimate gossip' (p. 7); 'as long as these letters remained private, their contradictory Larkins caused no offence. On the publication of the letters, however, he was accused of duplicity. He said one thing to one correspondent and something different to another'. He concludes: 'He compartmentalized his life' (p. 8); 'the mercurial shifts in persona in Larkin's interviews, essays and letters have caused many misreadings' (p. 8); 'some readers fail to register the performative playfulness of Larkin's self-caricatures' (p. 9). However, despite the fact that Booth is indeed correct in asserting that people should acknowledge that Larkin was continuously performing, like Motion, he chooses which aspects of Larkin's personality are performances. This leaves his argument problematic. Booth tells his readers that when Larkin makes comments on children in his interviews (p. 10), or on marriage in his letters and his work (p. 10), that he is not being sincere. But given that he avers that Larkin is continually performing then how can Booth possibly decipher between which versions of Larkin are fact and which are fictitious? Booth cannot have it both ways; he cannot insist that Larkin's readership acknowledge his 'performative playfulness' and 'self-caricatures' and then decide for us which are sincere, and which are not.

This signalling to the reader about which caricatures to believe and which to ignore is most evident in Booth's introduction when he tears apart any previous convictions held against Larkin: 'the various ideological Larkin's who raise the passions of some critics, are provisional personae' (p. 9). He discusses 'the fervent nationalist Larkin' (p. 9), describing it as 'the product of as much performance as it is ideology' (p. 9); 'Larkin the racist is a similar fiction' as his 'self-irony escapes the notice of critics' (p. 9). His defence against Larkin's supposed racism is that 'whatever language Larkin might use (and this includes 'nigger' 'wog' and 'yid'), he would not have theorized about racial inferiority or degeneracy, as did some writers of the century' (p. 10). Booth further evidences this by supplying information that during Larkin's early years in Hull, he recommended E.R. Braithewaite's anti-racist novel, *To Sir, With Love,* to his staff (p. 10). To strengthen his case, for anyone who still has hesitancy, Booth informs his readers that 'in 1946, he [Larkin] dreamt he was a black man walking through race-course crowds with Amis's future wife, Hilly Bardwell, sobbing with fear that he might be lynched', before asserting, 'his subconscious was not racist' (p. 10). However, this is not enough evidence to completely erase the racist content found in the earlier edition of letters: 'I'm afraid I always feel London is very unhealthy – I can hear fat Caribbean germs pattering after me in the Underground' (Larkin to Pym, 26 January 1962, Thwaite, 1992, p. 339). Rather, it illuminates that Booth, like Thwaite, is deliberately posturing a Larkin to suit his critical agenda. Booth continues to tackle, and undermine, all accusations thrown at Larkin: 'It is a similar story with Larkin the misogynist' (p. 10). He draws on Motion's assertion that Larkin's girls school stories reveal 'a wish to dominate women' and his 'creepy interest in sadistic pornography' and counteracts it by arguing that 'domination and sadism were alien to his temperament', and that the Brunette Coleman stories demonstrate 'his desire to be a girl' (p. 10). Moreover, he reflects these stories onto Larkin's own life to further convince his readership of Larkin's lack of misogyny: 'it is these

erotic proclivities which underlay his fear of domestic entanglement with Ruth Bowman or Monica Jones, and his muse-adoration of Winifred Arnott and Maeve Brennan' (p. 10). While Booth's argument about fear of domestic entanglement and muse-adoration can be evidenced in his letters to women in his life, they contradict entirely how he presented himself to Amis – as we explored earlier. If we are to follow Booth's train of thought – inclined to assume the tender and gentle letters are genuine – then we are doing Larkin's literariness a disservice. Moreover, we must recognise that Larkin's letters to Brennan, Arnott, and more significantly to our present discussion, Jones, may *appear* genuine, but that does not prove that they *are* genuine. This 'honest' and 'confessional' nature which unveils itself in *Letters to Monica,* for example, was as much of a persona as the exaggerated bloke-ish character found in the letters written to Amis, even if not as glaringly obvious.

Focusing, then, on the *Letters to Monica,* in his biography Booth presents Larkin's epistolary relationship with Jones in a similar way to Thwaite. Interestingly, he begins to introduce Larkin's relationship with Jones by comparing it with his friendship with Amis: 'In real life Larkin was developing a protective loyalty towards Monica, intensified by the unremitting hostility of Amis, who was jealous of his new rival (p. 129). It is of popular belief that, as Booth suggests himself, that 'Monica Jones features as the neurotic, manipulative Margaret Peel' in Amis's famous novel, *Lucky Jim*. From this, Booth concludes that 'Amis took every opportunity to ridicule his rival for Larkin's affections' (p. 129). By using this comparison, like Thwaite, Booth is immediately devaluing the importance of Larkin's relationship with Amis, despite the emphasis placed on it by Motion, and indeed previously by Thwaite. It is now being replaced in Booth's mind by his relationship with Jones as more significant and genuine – moreover, she is presented as the one who knew him best and 'to whom he was to become attached for the rest of his life' (p. 130). Booth discusses Larkin's ambivalence towards marriage with reference to Jones: 'He occasionally

felt Lawrentian impulses towards wholehearted commitment. In a letter of 19 September 1951, he told her: "I long to abandon myself entirely to someone else" […] However, his tone remains detached and analytical, and in other letters he stresses his need for solitude' (p. 165). This is interesting in that Booth does note the echo of D.H. Lawrence in his letters yet does not persevere with the literariness of the letter. Rather he chooses to focus on what it tells us about Larkin's relationship with Jones. As he continues to scrutinise the letters Larkin writes to Jones, Booth places intimacy ahead of creativity:

> From May 1951 onwards, imagery of rabbits become a recurrent feature of their correspondence. Letters begin 'Forepaws', 'Ears' or 'Bun' (Bunny-rabbit) in reference to their shared delight in the stories of Beatrix Potter. He adorns his letters with charming sketches of a rabbit in a skirt: watching cricket under a parasol, searching her room for lost scissors, playing croquet, sleeping under a huge mushroom in the rain (complete with slugs and dangling spiders), writing with a quilled pen by candlelight. He depicts himself as a rather shapeless seal, in a schoolboy pun or 'sealed with wax' or 'sealed with affection' which goes back to his earliest family letters. His engaging self-dramatizations and generous concern for Monica's wellbeing create a secure shared world. (p. 165)

For over thirty years, Larkin and Jones' letters aided them to live in this 'secure shared' world, and rather than it being an intimate world, as Booth suggests, I would argue that this marks the beginning of their literary world via letters. By creating the characters of 'Monica the Rabbit' and 'Larkin the Seal', Larkin is placing roles upon them both and the letters begin to read more like stories. For example, in 1954, Larkin writes to Jones drawing on this created world: 'Dearest Bun, you were certainly yanked away quickly enough at the heel of the hunt […] What kind of flight did you have? I thought of you, when I was eating my lunch, soaring through the large cloud littered sky […] I was very dejected this morning when no rabbit came to my bedside to thump its drum!' (Larkin to Jones, 3 August 1954, Thwaite, 2010, 111). The zoomorphosis of Jones in the letters does add an intimate and private element to the correspondence as Booth recognises. However, I would aver that it is more than that. By addressing Jones as a rabbit, Larkin is not only playing to his audience, but

allowing himself and his reader to step out of reality and truth, and enter his epistolary fictional world, playing the role of the intimate lovers – a world where they can live in imagined domesticity rather than in reality. That is not to say that Larkin did not love Jones, but that the fictitious role-play places their correspondence outside of biographical realms and causes us to explore it through an alternative lens.

In order to reinforce the inauthenticity of Larkin's letters to Jones, it is important that we briefly draw on some of Larkin's own criticism of letter writing. Thwaite and Booth present this epistolary relationship as the key to Larkin's inner thoughts and feelings, but Larkin's own exploration of letters undermines these claims to intimacy entirely. Larkin's essays challenge the conventional notions of letter writing, and most importantly, they challenge how we should read his own correspondence with Monica Jones and others.

'Designed to impress rather than illuminate'

Larkin is very often considered a realist poet; one who rejected the obscure Modernist movement. When asked by Ian Hamilton who and what influenced Larkin to become a poet, his response is dismissive of the radical poetry movement:

> Well, granted that one doesn't spend any time at all thinking about oneself in these terms, I would say that I have been most influenced by the poetry that I've enjoyed – and this poetry has not been Eliot or Pound or anybody who is normally regarded as 'modern' (Thwaite, 2001, p. 19)

Larkin sums up Modernism by stating that 'every new poem has to be the sum of all old poems' and he argues that it is 'not how poetry works' (p. 54). In his essay, 'The Pleasure Principal', he describes what he believes to be the proper way to produce poetry. For him, this 'new kind of bad poetry', which 'does not even try' to move the reader, is too concerned with making 'reference beyond their own limits'. He argues that this style of poetry is more concerned with the artist than the audience: they are 'merely reminding themselves of what they know already, rather than re-creating it for a third party' (Larkin, 1982, pp. 80-81). In

his interviews, he further rejects this obscurity and hybridity, moving poetry towards the traditional – one which apparently is not too difficult to understand: 'there's not much to *say* about my work. Once you've read a poem, that's it, it's all quite clear what it means' (p. 54). Given his use of simple language, familiar themes, and supposed lack of allusions, it has not been difficult for Larkin to convince his readership that this is the case. Moreover, Larkin also hints to his readers that not only are his poems easily understood, but they are also biographical. As he says in his interview with John Haffenden, 'I think we *want* the life and the work to make sense together: I suppose ultimately they must, since they both relate to the same person. Eliot would say they don't, but I think Eliot is wrong' (Thwaite, 2001, p. 49). What could be more anti-modern than a reliable biographical narrator, drawing on no allusions or intertextual referencing, as apparently seen in Larkin's four slim volumes of published poetry? Unfortunately, many readers have taken these comments literally, leaving the predominant assumption that the protagonist in the poetry is Larkin. Moreover, if readers believe that Larkin's poetry is speaking the truth about his life, then undoubtedly, they will draw the same conclusions in his letters. Yet it remains questionable whether Larkin truly believed that Eliot was wrong, as Larkin's essays illuminate a number of contradictions.

Though Larkin appears to encourage biographical readings in his interviews, his criticism of other writers suggests something different. Larkin's essays and reviews tend to focus particularly on the biography of writers of the twentieth century as much as, if not more, than the work itself. For someone who encourages readers to link the life and the work, this theme may be unsurprising. However, what is surprising is what he has to say about the biography of others. When reading Auden's biography, he reminds us that we are unable to discover the truth. He questions which Auden we should trust: 'the Thirties loud-speaker, relaying indiscriminate quackery and loveliness, the great American windbag, the Mediterranean interfoliation of the Oxford English Dictionary with the Opera Directory?' (p. 282). With

Evelyn Waugh, we are discouraged against believing anything Waugh writes to be 'true' (p. 287). Cyril Connolly's journal cannot be trusted either; for Larkin, 'his journal is never coherent autobiography or reasoned advocacy; its pleasure is in its anecdotes, its *apercus,* its sheer irrelevant farce' (p. 336). Looking at the biography of Eliot, he is very aware of Eliot's ability to adopt personae:

> There were compartments in Eliot too: 'A company of actors inside one suit', was V.S Pritchett's description of him, a telling one that Ackroyd quotes twice; Edmund Wilson, meeting him in 1933, concluded that his personality was 'really rather incoherent', and calls him 'a self-invented character'. (pp. 360-361)

If Larkin firmly believed that the life and the work were not separate, then it is unlikely that he would have placed so much emphasis on their potential for segregation in his own reviews of others. With Hardy (in the introduction), Larkin acknowledges a writer's ability to choose what we should know and what is kept in the dark. This can easily be seen in Larkin's own adoption of personae in his own poetry, interviews and letters, as they all unveil contradictions. As suggested by Booth, Larkin 'compartmentalized his life' (Booth, 2014, p. 8). Moreover, in his essays Larkin discourages us from believing what other authors tell us to be true – something he reflects on when reviewing the biographical content of Evelyn Waugh and Cyril Connolly – leaving us, as readers, to question the integrity of Larkin's own inner self. His criticism of writers draws out a separation between the author and the work, prompting us to question if we can really know the one holding the pen. Critics such as Booth, Osborne and Steinberg have themselves begun explorations into Larkin's ability to manipulate his readers into believing that 'poetry is about yourself'. Osborne turns readers away entirely from biography; Steinberg uses the biography to reinforce the fictionality of the poetry; Booth uses the life to revisit the poetry. This thesis looks beyond the literary published works – like the poetry and prose – and turns the focus back to the letter. Larkin's criticism of the letters and biography of others only reinforces that epistolary writing should

not be read as truly authentic but as a platform for literary writing – and in Larkin's case an escape from his real biography.

What is most interesting about Larkin's biographical criticism of other writers is that he tends to place a primary focus on personal letters. For him, this is the platform wherein adoption of personae is most evident. He argues that with Hardy, 'it was less a falsification than a shifting of emphasis, but these letters show very well how it worked' (Thwaite, 2001, p. 256). Reviewing Evelyn Waugh, Larkin makes similar comments: 'A writer's letters stand midway between literature and biography' (p. 287), drawing our attention to the different versions of Waugh found in one edited collection:

> This may be part of Waugh's epistolary irony, and understood as such by his correspondents, but they support Claire Luce's quick judgement that he had 'no heart'. Yet against them can be set his letters to his wife and family, nearly always affectionate, sometimes charming, as if a totally different person held the pen. (p. 289)

Firstly, when Larkin discusses Hardy and Waugh's letters, the emphasis is placed on the writers themselves. He draws his reader's attention to how the author of the letter can adapt their personae, and emphasise certain characteristics about themselves, dependent on who they are writing to. Letters are equidistant from literature and biography for Larkin, and therefore, once a writer takes a pen in hand, some form of invention will take place - whether emphasising, downplaying, outright falsification, or role-playing. Secondly, and perhaps more interestingly when reflecting on Thwaite's two editions of Larkin's letters, when Larkin reviews the volume of Rupert Brooke's letters when it was first published, he draws his reader's attention to the fact that his trustees 'objected to his [the editor's] selection on the grounds that it 'seriously misrepresented' the writer of the letters'. He presents us with the conclusion that, 'not only have we to decide what kind of person the letters suggest', but that we must acknowledge that the people who were closest to him think that this edition is a misrepresentation' (Larkin, 1982, p. 177). Larkin not only recognises that an author can

manipulate personae, but that an editor, or indeed the trustees, can account for how a writer is represented in the public realm. Thwaite and Motion presented one version of Larkin surrounding the *Selected Letters*; Thwaite and Booth present another surrounding *Letters to Monica.* Larkin himself draws our attention to the fact that the trustees did not recognise the version of Brooke that Sir Geoffrey Keynes presented in *The Letters of Rupert Brooke* in 1968. This not only highlights that Rupert Brooke was inherently different dependent on who he was writing to, but also that by emphasising certain correspondences, an editor can create a picture of a writer which is unfamiliar to others – even those who claim to know the writer best. Larkin reinforces this when writing about Wilfred Own and the posthumous unveiling of his life. Larkin reminds us that when a writer dies young, the biographical contents (such as letters) are often 'guarded by the widow, family friends, trustees and fifty years may go by before a total picture is presented' (p. 228). In the interim we do have a picture in our heads, but it is 'put out by precisely the people (widow, family, etc) who are standing in the way of complete documentation', and when the final picture comes out, it will 'certainly require ultimate modification, which (again almost certainly) will come as something of a shock' (p. 228). For Larkin, when reading correspondences, there are a variety of factors at play. Firstly, the author's own invention. Secondly, the editor's hypothesis. Thirdly and finally, what is left out of the public realm. When we accumulate all these factors together, then it seems bizarre that we would ever consider reading private letters as windows onto the soul. Yet, for generations, letters have been read in this light.

When approaching Larkin's work, this is where the main contradiction lies. On the one hand he is telling us that he rejects any hint of Modernist disguise, and that we should approach his work as though the protagonist of the poetry is Larkin himself. On the other, Larkin is continuously emphasising to his readers that we cannot trust authors, editors or trustees when it comes to biographical material. His own discoveries about Rupert Brooke

and Wilfred Owen are ironic in that they almost turned out to be Larkin's own fate. Whilst Jones was alive, she decided not to allow their correspondence to feature very much in the *Selected Letters,* which indeed created an impression in its own right. However, the publication of *Letters to Monica* created a shock, as Larkin predicted, not because we now had access to the 'full picture', but rather to another contribution in creating the full picture. *Letters to Monica* is in no way a more authentic version of Larkin. It is a contribution to the fullness of his literary life. Writing and interpretation of letters are always at the forefront of Larkin's mind, and can be seen in his second novel *A Girl in Winter,* to which we will now turn. This novel explores how we invent ourselves in letters, and also how our epistolary selves are perceived by readers. This latter theme is particularly apt as not only is Larkin's adoption of personae evident in his letters, but these fictional constructs reveal the importance of the reader in creating the imaginary worlds that are found in the epistle. *A Girl in Winter* explores both sides of the correspondence, demonstrating how the letter allows both writer and reader to step out of our reality, reinvent themselves and feel part of one another's world. However, the novel also exemplifies that although the epistle allows you to cross the threshold to the imaginary, you remain hinged between it and reality; although the characters may want to live in their constructed world, reality holds them back.

A Girl in Winter

We have identified this awareness that letters leave writers hinged between fiction and reality in Larkin's own critical essays, and in his first novel *Jill,* as explored in Part I. However, *A Girl in Winter* takes epistolary exploration to the next level. As Magaretta Jolly and Liz Stanley elucidate: 'while the familiar letter may be valued for its personality, authenticity, or intimacy, the meaning of those effects is specific not just to time and place but addressee' (Jolly and Stanley, 2005, p. 92). Larkin's 1947 novel not only explores how we present ourselves in letters but illuminates the importance of the recipient and the epistolary

relationship. In other words, in *A Girl in Winter* Larkin dissects how in letter writing our reader is at the forefront of our mind – what sort of letter we expect they want to receive, topics they want us to discuss and their expectations of how we present ourselves to them. What is more, how our letters are then perceived by our reader, and how we view our correspondent from their written responses, play a vital role in Larkin's second novel. This is predominantly demonstrated through the epistolary relationship between Katherine Lind and Robin Fennell, which continues throughout the novel.

In Part One of Larkin's novel, we are introduced to Katherine's relationship to the Fennels as she anticipates receiving a reply from them. After posting a letter 'she had written on impulse' (Larkin, 1947, p. 23), she 'was waiting anxiously for a reply'. When she finally received it she was overcome with a strong sense of nostalgia – not so much for the person who had written the letter, but a nostalgia for the letter itself: it was

> written on the same notepaper that Robin had used, with the house and the village and the telephone number stamped boldly in blue at the head of each page. The mere sight of this brought such emotion that she could hardly read it, and had to go through it several times before she could gather its meaning. (p. 23)

As the following pages demonstrate, Katherine remained in a state of anticipation: 'All the week she had been waiting for Robin's letter. So far it had not come, but the interval lulled her excitement to a powerful, delicious expectation, strong enough to carry her through the daily work that she normally found disagreeable' (p. 24). When the letter arrives, we begin to recognise the importance of the epistolary for Katherine:

> Her name and address were written in Robin's sloping handwriting, that had scarcely altered at all since he had written to her six years ago: each character was given its full shape, very occasionally two words would be joined carelessly, but never two words that did not look well when joined. It did not feel as if there were more than one sheet in the envelope.
>
> She laid it down again. So here it was.
>
> She would open it, of course; but not now, not while Miss Green was here. Though she thought she had prepared herself enough for its arrival, now she held it she was

> shy of opening it, as if it contained examination results. For in a sense it would be the verdict of the Fennels upon her. For whatever Robin said, it would be less his own individual opinion than the present attitude to the family put into his mouth. If he suggested that she visit them, she would know that they would like to see her again; but if he said no more than his mother – surprised you're in England, why didn't you tell us, hope you're getting on all right – she would know similiarly that on the whole they preferred to keep her at arm's length and that she had done wrong to write. This letter would settle it one way or another. (p. 53)

The entire first part of the novel focuses on Katherine's relationship with the Fennels, especially Robin, via letters. Here, we recognise that the nostalgia lies in the handwriting and the suspense in what response the letter will contain. This section unveils an interesting dynamic found in letter writing – suspense and the unknown. We are told that Katherine sent a letter impulsively, and since then she has imagined a variety of responses. Now that the letter has finally arrived, she is not entirely prepared to leave her imaginary world and enter the real world. In letter writing, our correspondent transports us back to reality with their responses. When we write a letter, we can create a persona, but we cannot tell how the reader is going to react until we receive their response. What is more, when Katherine finally opens the letter and realises that Robin will be coming to visit her, she is firmly catapulted out of any scenarios she imagined may happen – what they would think of her boss, Mr Anstey (p. 24), for example – and placed into reality. This created an anxiousness in Katherine, one which was strikingly different from waiting for the letter: 'Within her, an extraordinary dread was crawling. This she had not expected. Whatever else he had said, she would have time to think, to make herself ready' (p. 60). The lack of immediacy and the unknown are two of the thrilling aspects of letter writing – they allow the writer and reader space for creativity and invention that we cannot have from meeting face-to-face. This is the crux of the story between Robin and Katherine – their letter writing relationship overshadows their physical relationship and both prefer to remain in their epistolary world.

Part Two of *A Girl in Winter* transports us back to the beginning of Katherine and Robin's epistolary relationship. What started as a class pen-pal project, soon turned into a significant relationship for Katherine. At the beginning she was anxious about what sort of letter she might receive. His first letter was 'very formal', which relieved her fears. However, this quickly turned to disappointment when she felt that the letters lacked personal detail. Therefore, 'she started writing only half her letters in English, and filling the other half with more personal likes, dislikes, and enthusiasms, hoping to lure him into following suit' (p. 68). The novel at this point unveils an interesting dynamic in letter writing as Robin did indeed follow suit, adapting his letter writing style to suit Katherine's, but they 'remained equally dispassionate' (p. 68). As a result, Katherine adapts her style once again to try and get to know Robin better – the boy beneath the letters: 'As a last attempt, she had begun writing in diary form, with alternate (and usually shorter) entries in English, wondering if he could be persuaded to adopt this form and so become more intimate' (p. 68). Rebecca Earle in her monograph, *Epistolary Selves,* tackles the ancient trope of letters:

> Personal letters, particularly those written with no apparent thought to publication, have often been read as windows into the soul of the author. The ancient trope that views the letter as merely a conversation in writing lent particular force to this idea, whereby the letter becomes as unmediated and as unmeditated as a casual conversation. (Earle, 1999, p. 5)

Larkin, however, seems in this novel to present an epistolary relationship as the precise opposite of this 'ancient trope'. From the beginning of Katherine's letter writing to Robin, she carefully constructed how she would present herself in the letter in order to lure Robin in. Her adoption of style was both meditated and mediated. Robin, too, in sticking to 'his half and half arrangement' (Larkin, 1947, p. 68) was also considerate of how he came across in his letters. Moreover, Katherine adapts a variety of styles within her letters in an attempt to get Robin to 'adopt this form'. Here, Katherine is inviting Robin to join her in a 'more intimate' epistolary world that allows them to step out of reality. In real life, she knew

'fundamentally' that 'she did not want a close friendship with him' (pp. 68-9). However, a constructed imaginary world that allows them to *present* themselves as close 'would have made the task of writing to him much more interesting' (p. 69).

Now living in their shared epistolary world, Katherine felt secure as Robin was always at a distance. However, one day Katherine receives a letter from him inviting her for a three-week holiday in England. Reality was now beginning to pierce through their imagined world and the prospect horrified her. However, she was persuaded to go. As the reality set in that she would meet the Robin Fennel from the letters, she became more curious about him and, more importantly, she wondered what made him curious about her:

> It startled her that this unknown boy from England should think of her, adding month by month to the conception he had of her in his mind, until now he proposed that arrangements should be made and machinery put into motion so that they could meet. It was fascinating. How little she had thought of him, and how shallow her ideas had been: she scrambled up, put the light on, and took out his letters from the drawer she kept them in. Sitting up in bed, she read them through critically. The first thing that struck her was that they really said very little about cycling – or cathedrals, for that matter. And in any case, the English were very reserved. What was really important, she thought, dropping them on the counterpane, was that he should have kept on writing, promptly and indefatigably, even after her own interest had worn thin and her letters grown perfunctory. How kind he had been. What did he think of her? (p. 71)

We are now exploring different realms of the epistolary. As we saw in Part I, through the exploration of *Jill*, Larkin reveals a careful awareness of how one can present oneself in letters. Now, however, the focus shifts onto how those letters are perceived by the reader. The idea that Katherine was to meet Robin face-to-face catapulted her out of her comfort zone, where she and Robin could no longer be 'conceptions' that they formed in their minds 'month by month' but would enter reality – and here they may not live up to those conceptions. As the prospect of reality grows closer, so too does the imaginary world. By this I mean, in preparation for meeting Robin in the flesh Katherine's imaginings become much more vivid in her anticipation. She becomes aware of the image her recipient has created of

her rather than the image she herself sought to create in her letters. She also, on a rereading of his letters, begins to form a new image of Robin in her mind that he presented in his letters:

> For almost the first time she pictured him sitting in the lamplight at dusk, in a room in a house at the end of a lane in England, writing to her. How strange that he should want to bring her to that room. She picked a letter up, and brushed his signature with the tips of her fingers, imagining that she could feel the roughness of the ink. (pp. 71-2)

It is at this point that Katherine and Robin's epistolary relationship becomes more complex, however. As a reader of a novel pictures how the protagonist may look, reading a letter from someone you have not met is clearly no different for Katherine: 'At times she wondered what sort of appearance he presented: it was not a question to which she gave much thought, and she had assumed he was a variant of the red-hair, freckles and projecting teeth English face' (p. 72). However, imagination and reality are always at a distance: 'In this she had been wrong. The photograph showed him looking at the camera with his hands on his hips, lit by brilliant sunlight, wearing a cricket shirt. […] he was dark and slight, with long eyelashes' (p. 72). This marks the beginning of Larkin's exploration of the distance between the imagined and the real. In other words, it is through the epistolary relationship of Katherine and Robin that Larkin presents to his reader the idea that letter writing presents an opportunity for writer and recipient to adopt personae which very often contrast with reality. Therefore, for the remainder of the novel, Katherine and Robin remain hinged between the two, never quite crossing the threshold of either.

On their first physical encounter, Katherine meets a different persona from the Robin of the letters: 'This was not at all as she had pictured him. She had thought of him first as dull, then as inarticulate: both conceptions were wrong' (p. 77). It was not only appearances that startled Katherine, but his manner was also unlike the one she had interpreted from his correspondence: 'At first she had thought he was shy and was playing at being grown-up:

now it occurred to her that he was simply being natural' (p. 78). It is at this point that Katherine begins to feel conflicted. On the one hand, she concludes that the Robin she has just met face-to-face is the natural one, and the one in the letters a farce. However, on the other hand, she continues to search for the epistolary Robin who she perceived to be real:

> When was Robin going to start behaving naturally?
>
> So far he has stood insipidly upon his party-manners, even when they had been alone, as if *playing* at grown-ups. When would he drop that, and be more friendly and put her at ease?
>
> Because she had nearly stifled herself trying to be polite, none of the visit so far seemed quite real. It was all a little insincere, like a school prizegiving. The parents, of course, might always behave like that. But Robin *seemed to have taken his cue from them*, so that she had now met all four of them, one after another, and was left with the absurd feeling that the most important person, her *real* friend, had not yet appeared […]
>
> Was he, perhaps, shy? She pondered on his face, which she already knew well, and his attitude. It was impossible to think that. And she could not accuse him of being bored with her, either, because his attention was always on her and his manner was solicitous. Really, he *acted* as if he had long ago made up his mind about her and had brought about this meeting simply in order to check and correct one or two trifling points. There was no constraint in his manner at all.
>
> Then why should she assume he was *not behaving naturally*[3]*?*
>
> This was a facer. (p. 90)

For Katherine, it is as though Robin is wearing a mask, adopting a role in front of his parents that he will eventually discard. As Linda Kauffman in *Discourse of Desire* suggests, in letters writers are always 'discarding one mask after another and imagining new roles with dizzying speed' (Kauffman, 1986, p. 294). Here, Katherine continues to conclude that the boy she knows, 'her real friend', will take off his mask and reveal himself eventually. She dismisses the role she assumes Robin is playing: 'Oh, because he just couldn't be. He was only her own age. It couldn't be natural for anyone of sixteen to behave like a Prince Regent and foreign ambassador combined. It just wasn't possible' (Larkin, 1947, p. 90). Rather, for Katherine, Robin uses the epistolary to unveil his true self assuming that in his private letters to her he was more himself than he was in reality. Amanda Gilroy and W.M Verhoeven note that,

[3] Italics added for emphasis.

‘traditionally, non-fictional letters were regarded as an unproblematic historical source, giving us unmediated access to a writer’s thoughts’ (Gilroy and Verhoeven, 1996, p. 121). What is most interesting about Katherine’s contemplation, then, is that she is still convinced that the Robin of the correspondence is genuine despite previously using strategies (such as diary entries) in her own letter writing to draw him out. In 2001, Jonathan Ellis acknowledges how ‘letter writers clearly try to accommodate the recipient of their presents, matching style and yarn to the other person’s tastes’ (Ellis, 2001, p. 187). Ellis’ comments on letter writing practices are echoed in the novel, that Robin adopts his letter writing to match the style of Katherine’s. Yet, Katherine disregards this and finds authenticity in the writing rather than in person. Rather than seeing letters as a platform for writers to explore their creativity and fictionalise themselves as critics like Ellis does, Katherine’s thoughts in this first encounter with Robin seem to be more in line with Gilroy and Verhoeven. Although she did have to use various methods in an attempt to draw Robin out, for her the letter was nevertheless an attempt to get him to unveil his unmediated inner self. Though the evidence of fictionality reveals that Robin adapted his style to match that of his recipient, Katherine refuses to accept that he was playing a role for her. She holds on for the authentic Robin who, ‘in time would let her see’ (p. 91) this ‘real’ version – as she believes he had done so through the epistle.

This leitmotif of comparing the physical with the epistolary world is prevalent throughout the novel. Though it is most notable exploring the relationship between Katherine and Robin, it is also present in the background Larkin subtly plays with this theme through the character of Mr Anstey, Katherine’s boss. Once again Katherine spots two different personae in the physical and the epistolary, except this time it is in reverse order. At the beginning of *A Girl in Winter,* we are introduced to Mr Anstey, who is presented in a negative light: ‘She [Katherine] disliked him on sight, and as she got to know him better her dislike increased […] she disliked his face before she heard his voice, and what he had said seemed typical’ (p.

24). It is Mr Anstey's presence that makes Katherine's work difficult to bear: 'She loathed him so much that at times she wondered if he really was so bad, and whether there weren't some blind spot in her that prevented her from seeing him *naturally*[4]' (p. 24). In Part Three of the novel, we meet the alternative persona. Katherine reads a letter written by Mr Anstey to Veronica Parbury, which suggests an intimate relationship between the pair. Pondering over the letter, Katherine notices a few letter writing techniques:

> But what was the meaning? It seemed no sentence carried a loose end she could pick up and thereby unravel the whole. The masked phrases – "what we have discussed many times"; "what I suggest is the best way"; "we had better let the matter drop" – were as smooth and heavy in her hands as stones. (188)

It is as though Anstey knew that the letter may fall into the wrong hands. Nonetheless, this technique displays to the reader what an author must consider when writing a letter – not only do you need to consider your recipient, but the possibility that there may be other readers, and therefore that the writer may need to be guarded. Janet Gurkin Altmann explores the theme of the relationship between public and private in *Epistolary: Approaches to a Form*:

> The movement from the private to the public in much of epistolary fiction lays bare another paradox: as a reflection of self, or of the self's relationships, the letter connotes privacy and intimacy. As a document addressed to another, the letter reflects the need for an audience, an audience that may suddenly expand when that document is confiscated, shared, or published'. (Altmann, 1982, pp. 186-7).

Similar to Larkin's novel, Altmann explores how the epistolary relationship becomes complicated once the correspondence is read by someone outside it. This is identified through Katherine's reading of Anstey's letter addressed to Parbury. Like readers of personal letters, Katherine broods over the letter trying to solve its hidden meaning. She goes from 'sale of some furniture', 'proposed illegality', 'will-making' or 'disposal of property' (Larkin, 1947, p. 188) before arriving at her conclusion that it must be marriage: 'it was ridiculous to think

[4] My emphasis

of Mr. Anstey marrying anyone, but that was the first thing that would come to anyone's mind if they read the letter' (p. 189). In forming this conclusion, she holds Anstey to what she considers 'normal' societal standards: 'No-one would write so guardedly unless their feelings were involved' (p. 189). In finding common ground, Katherine's perceptions of Anstey begin to change: 'The figure of him was blurring in her mind, no longer a sharply-cut target for loathing, and was beginning to waver like something seen under water, to wobble, and even grow for moments together to more than life-size, not so much menacing as monumental' (p. 189). Katherine's perceptions of him in reality and in the imagination were at odds with each other as she came to the realisation that she could no longer see Anstey as one-dimensional: 'Her compact hatred dissipated against it, like a herd deprived of its driver, pulled up, beginning to amble in all directions, grown purposeless' (p. 189). In Part Two, just as Katherine was searching for Robin to start behaving 'naturally', here she is once again convinced that this letter to Parbury is a more 'natural', more real, version of Mr Anstey than he presents to Katherine in reality. This is interesting in that Katherine reads letters as revealing the true self, one that they are unable to present in reality. However, throughout biographical studies, this is often how an edition of letters were presented – as a reflection of the inner self. Indeed, Thwaite's edition of *Letters to Monica* follows this convention as he argues that, 'it was to Monica that Larkin poured out his fears and miseries (Thwaite 2011, x). Larkin's novel, however, appears to be complicating these assumptions and present letters in a different light. In *A Girl in Winter*, we are presented with two versions of Anstey – the first her disagreeable boss and the second a lover. Both personae are equally as convincing, yet Katherine places more weight on Anstey's persona to Parbury. However, we do not know for certain that the letter is discussing marriage, or indeed if the relationship was as intimate as is suggested. Rather, Katherine applies her own perceptions to determine what the content of the letter is regarding, and who Mr Anstey 'truly' is. However, like Robin, the two

versions of Anstey remain at odds with one another – leaving the reader of the novel (and Katherine, as reader of the letter) unable to pin down the 'real' Mr Anstey.

During her next physical encounter with Anstey, Katherine attempts to alter her perception of him to match the one from the letter: 'She realised with annoyance that she could not hate him as simply as she had done, now that she had come across this part of him that had no bearing on her' (p. 204). She could not disregard the intimate persona found in his private correspondence: 'For her conception of him as a hostile cartoon, she had to substitute a person who had and could evoke feelings' (p. 204-5). Yet throughout this encounter, Anstey's persona towards Katherine had not altered from Part One of the novel as we see when she returns to the office in Part Three. Rather than seeing a softer more genuine side, Mr Anstey presents his harsher persona to Katherine which she loathes once again: 'she would have liked to squash him with a great stone where he sat' (p. 210). Therefore, the 'real' Anstey and Katherine's imagined Anstey remain in two separate worlds. Moreover, so do the worlds of the real and imagined Robin. As the focus of the novel shifts back to Katherine and Robin in Part Three, the distance between the world constructed by creative impulse and the actual world remains as silent neighbours. When Robin visits Katherine in her home, Katherine is still searching for the Robin she has perceived from their past correspondence: 'This, she told herself, was the Robin she had written to in peace and comfort when she was sixteen' (p. 229). However, she is not fully convinced: 'If her mind had not been so tired that it could be swept along unheeding, his sudden appearance might have moved her. As it was, it failed to connect' (p. 229). Here, Katherine begins to recognise that the physical and epistolary never fully bind. As she first tells herself, 'This is Robin! This is Robin you were expecting! He's come' (p. 233); it does not last. In fact, the Robin in the real world and the one presented in the letters are basically strangers: 'What abstract kindliness she could command was in his service, but it was no more than she might show to a fellow-traveller in

a railway carriage or on board a steamer. Indeed, that was the strongest bond she felt between them' (p. 237). Katherine's perception of Robin from their epistolary world will never match up to the Robin in the physical world – just like Anstey.

Katherine's readings of the letters written by Robin and Anstey perfectly encapsulate how they allowed her to momentarily step out of reality. She entered an epistolary world, where she was able to imagine the writer of the letter as someone whom she could relate to and be a part of their world. However, when reality seeps through the perimeters of these spheres, Katherine is plunged back to reality by facing the realisation that not only are the men not who they presented themselves as, but that their real worlds did not align with their epistolary selves in the way that she imagined them. Therefore, like Kemp in *Jill*, though she struggled to leave the imaginary, she must return to her reality. With this conflation between fictionality and actuality in mind, I will now turn to Larkin's correspondence with Jones to demonstrate that they, too, lived in a world constructed by Larkin – the world of Rabbit and Seal who were occasionally visited by reality.

'Rabbithood'

The beginning of this part of the thesis focused on how Thwaite and Booth attempt to unshackle Larkin from negative criticism. Both have drawn upon Larkin's letters to Jones and their intimate relationship to demonstrate that there was another side to Larkin. Booth, in particular, homes in on the undesirable elements unveiled in *Selected Letters*, such as racism, right-wing political views, and misogyny, and positions these letters against those of a more intimate and gentle nature. This is certainly a trend in Larkin criticism: The Larkin-Amis correspondence has often been called upon to demonstrate that Larkin was performing in his letters. In 2005, Richard Bradford focused particularly on the relationship between Larkin and Amis in his biography: 'From the 1940s when they first corresponded Amis and Larkin

had evolved an epistolary style that was exclusive to their letters to each other' (Bradford, 2005, p. 17). He analysed their style as drifting between 'farce, caricature and self-parody' (p. 17) concluding that 'essentially they became exaggerated versions of themselves and mimicked their own and other people's linguistic habits and attitudes' (p. 17). For Bradford, this role-playing was visible in both their private and public personae: 'Both men in interviews, essays and various *ex cathedra* comments on their work contributed to images of themselves, and the press played along. Eventually their public persona became a feature of their letters' (p. 17). Martin Amis describes their letters as 'an escape into their own private little world' (Eagleton, 1993). More recently, in 2010, Gillian Steinberg focuses on their epistolary relationship: 'Impressing Amis was rather important to him [Larkin], and undoubtedly Larkin believed that Amis would be impressed by sexual language and adolescent vulgarity' (Steinberg 2010, p. 50). Similar to Booth, Steinberg draws on more than just the Amis correspondence to demonstrate that Larkin adapted his persona to impress his male recipients. She calls upon his letters written to Robert Conquest when discussing pornography: 'When he writes to Conquest that he "admired the painstaking realism of it – I mean the teacher really did look like a teacher, & I greatly appreciated the school-like bell on the wall," he is playing, in an obviously light-hearted way, not only with the image of the photograph but with his image as presented to his friend' (p. 55). Steinberg also explores the Larkin-Gunner correspondence in response to the previous racist allegations. As Steinberg argues, 'readers of the letters seem largely unable to read the context and instead read a kind of highlighted version of the letters, noticing the racism but not the self-mocking for and self-awareness of the racism' (pp. 52-3). Looking at one letter in particular, written in 1973, which stunned many readers, one can notice that he immediately mocks his own distasteful views:

> I quite agree about life being better under the Conservatives. Let's try Enoch for a bit, I say.
>
> Prison for strikers
> Bring back the cat
> Kick out the niggers –
> How about that?
>
> Ooh Larkin, I'm sorry to find you holding these views. (Larkin to Gunner, 14 November 1973, pp. 52)

When Terry Eagleton quoted these lines in his documentary, *J'accuse Philip Larkin* in 1993, he failed to include the significant last line. Yet, as Steinberg suggests, that last line changes the entire tone of the letter. It evidences Larkin's own self-awareness; he knew himself that his comments were unacceptable, but it was primarily offered to entertain his friend. However, only focusing on the distasteful letters to emphasise Larkin's performances is problematic. Whilst Booth, Bradford, and Steinberg are indeed correct in pointing out to their readers Larkin's own self-mockery in his letters, in what follows I will explore the letters which did not cause the same offence. In fact, I will be exploring the fictionality present in the letters that were used to defend Larkin, recognising that they, too, were a presentation. By doing so, the performative emphasis that was originally placed on Larkin's letters to Amis, Conquest and Gunner, will also be placed upon in his letters to Jones and their epistolary world.

As we have seen, the correspondence with Jones is often regarded as honest and true, almost confessional – as Thwaite presents them, they are the next best thing to Larkin's private diaries. However, on two occasions in unpublished letters, Larkin writes to Jones about what he has arguably been saying all along: 'From past experience I have found that my remarks about myself are not very trustworthy: they are invariably designed to conceal rather than reveal, and are based a good deal on impulse of the moment and escape states of mind by transcribing them' (Larkin to Jones, 1 June 1951, Hull History Centre Ref: U DX 341/3). Though we have already seen this letter on page 38 of this thesis, it is important that it

is reiterated when we explore his letters to Jones to dismantle the idea that his letters to Jones are authentic. From Larkin's interviews and his two novels, he has always remained cynical of the written letter. In his criticism, he steers away from reading letters as purely biographical and recognises the separate compartments many writers divide their lives into. Seventeen years later, this is echoed in another letter to Jones: 'It's so difficult to answer, partly because of our parallel telephone conversations & partly because, well, I don't know, I'm not so confident about telling the truth as you: not so sure I can, not so sure I want to' (Larkin to Jones, 4 August 1968, Thwaite 2011, p. 389). He steers Jones away from trusting anything that he says. Here I am careful not to fall into the trap of taking these letters as Larkin's honest reflections on letter writing. I acknowledge that he may be deliberately misleading her. However, as this study has demonstrated so far, Larkin's letters continue to demonstrate a manipulation of personae and an inauthenticity when reading to uncover the life. Instead, they are a step out of that life.

From the beginning of their correspondence, Larkin attempts to avoid another Katherine and Robin situation:

> I'm sorry if my ponderous adumbrations(!) sounded melodramatic: all I meant is this: our friendship, though successful, has been confined to a narrowish front, and if from that you've constructed an over-favourable image of me I do feel almost bound to say that to my mind you wd like me less – or think less of me – if you had the opportunity of learning my general behaviour. (Larkin to Jones, 23 July 1950, p. 7)

Deterring Jones away from falsified perceptions, Larkin immediately recognises the gap between the physical and the epistle. He informs Jones that there are elements of himself that he does not expose in this 'narrowish' epistolary friendship that they have. He suggests to her that the reality of him will not live up to her imagined perceptions – perceptions that she has formed through the image he sought to create in his letters to her. As *A Girl in Winter* demonstrated, an opportune use of the letter can lead to self-caricature. However,

correspondence is two-way, meaning that the reader's role is as vital as that of the writer. This added dimension to letter writing demonstrates how we cannot control entirely how we are perceived in a letter. We can, to paraphrase Elizabeth Bishop, put on a performance (Ellis, 2015, p. 10), but how that show is interpreted is dependent upon the recipient. Larkin's letter to Jones suggests an acknowledgement of this. Indeed, for the many years that followed, Larkin reiterated this fact whenever their meetings in reality did not live up to their epistolary lives. For him, the epistolary world is safer:

> There's something makes me less good than I ought to be, and I wish it didn't. When I'm away from you I think: Next time we'll really clear away some of the webs between us - & yet when we meet it doesn't happen: I grow stiff & silent, and never move off the ground of rabbithood, which is all very well but it prevents discussion of the real situation, don't you think? I don't know if it's my fault, or yours, or nobody's: I think it's true to say that I do to some extent seize up, automatically, when we meet – but don't take this badly, dear: I'm honestly only trying to explain myself, or even explain it away, if that were possible. I mean, obviously there must be something, or we should long ago have settled things. If we are so similar and get on so well & should like the same things, honestly, then I don't see what's stopping us. Do you see what I mean, o wise rabbit? (*LM*, 27 April 1955, 154).

What is interesting about this letter is not so much that Jones does not live up to Larkin's perception of her; rather it is his own self-awareness of the disparity between his epistolary and physical presence. For him, their relationship is much smoother behind the safety of the pen, allowing him to adopt his style to suit her expectations – an expectation he knows he cannot live up to in reality. Larkin wants to remain in 'rabbithood' – which lies at the very crux of their correspondence – a place that allows him to step out of his real life and enter a world that is constructed by him.

What is most interesting about *Letters to Monica* in comparison to *Selected Letters* is that Thwaite has included some of Jones' responses in the footnotes. It appears that Jones, too, recognised the space between the real and epistolary worlds: 'I can write this, just, but I'm sure I couldn't say it – I am not in tears, but tears are behind my eyes, making eyes & head

ache. If once I start thinking of reality, *all* the sad things lock to my mind at once' (Jones to Larkin, 26/27 September 1962, p. 304). Both their letters appear to echo the theme of Larkin's famous 'Talking in Bed' which takes to task the notion that in forms of intimacy couples allow themselves to be truthful:

> 'Talking in bed ought to be easiest,
> Lying together there goes back so far,
> An emblem of two people being honest.
>
> Yet more and more time passes silently'. (Burnett, 2012, pp. 61, lines 1-4)

The speaker of Larkin's poem subverts the traditional notion of lying in bed together as a symbol of intimacy and replaces it with distance. The poem takes to task a theme which Larkin has played with in his novel *A Girl in Winter,* his letters to Jones and indeed in his own criticism – in reality intimacy ought to the easiest, but it is never the case. Here in Larkin and Jones' 'Rabbithood', they are safer within the emblem of their fictionality – where Jones plays the role of the Rabbit and Larkin the Seal: roles that continue throughout their lives.

By creating the characters of Rabbit and Seal, Jones and Larkin are automatically placing their correspondence in fictional realms. Firstly, through the use of zoomorphosis. Addressing Jones in the letters, Larkin chooses a variety of animal features all relating to the rabbit: 'paws', 'ears', 'bun', or 'furry face' (Thwaite, 2011). After a short visit, Larkin writes to Jones to imply that he is missing her: 'I was very dejected this morning when no rabbit came to my bedside to thump its drum!' (Larkin to Jones, 3 August 1954, p. 111). Larkin's careful dialect places Jones further away from reality as he places her in his zoomorphisised world: 'hope you are vanishing into the burrow of sleep' (Larkin to Jones, 23 May 1951, p. 38). It is not merely the creation of the Rabbit and Seal that calls attention to the literariness of Larkin's letters to Jones. Rather, it is the way Larkin's 'rabbithood' world participates in a self-consciously intertextual realm derived from Larkin's reading of the letters of other

writers. As any reader of *Letters to Monica* will recognise, Larkin and Jones continuously discussed writers in depth – including the writing of Katherine Mansfield. What is interesting about this in particular is that it is not her published works that fascinate the pair but her letters that impress them most.

The Bun and Only

Here it must be noted that I am not the first critic to notice Larkin's interest in the writing of Katherine Mansfield. In 2001 Raphaël Ingelbien pointed to the mutual interest of Larkin and Sutton in the work of Mansfield. In his article, 'A Girl in the Forties', Ingelbien draws on a letter Larkin wrote to Sutton: 'I share a hell of a lot of common characteristics with her', Larkin writes, 'I admire her a great deal, and feel very close to her in some things' (Larkin to Sutton, 10 August 1963, Thwaite 1992, p.62). This esteem for Mansfield has led Ingelbien to suggest that 'Katherine Lind in *A Girl in Winter* may have been modelled on Katherine Mansfield' (Ingelbien, 2001, p. 83). He draws on Mansfield's own letters to support his hypothesis: Like Katherine Lind in the story, Ingelbien reminds us that Mansfield was 'both English and foreign'; she would express a 'hatred of foreign places', 'never felt at home in England', and this 'alienation made her a particularly fitting model for the protagonist of *A Girl in Winter*' (pp. 84-5). Ingelbien certainly may have been onto something here. However, I would add that it is not just only Mansfield the woman or the short story writer that was the predominant influence over Larkin's second novel, or indeed his epistolary writing. Rather, it is Mansfield's own hypothesis surrounding letter writing itself which attracted Larkin's attention. In a letter written to Jones, Larkin echoes one of Mansfield's letters to Virginia Woolf: 'You write so *damned* well, Virginia, so *damned* well[5]' (Larkin to Jones, 26 October

[5] The letter from Katherine Mansfield to Virginia Woolf can be found in *The Letters of Katherine Mansfield*. Volume Two. Ed. John Middleton Murry: 'You write so *damned* well, so *devilish* well' (Murry, 1928, p. 227).

1950, Thwaite, 2011, p. 16). This undoubtedly suggests a certain familiarity with Mansfield's letters.

Mansfield has indeed been widely renowned for her Modernist short stories. However, her letters have also received critical acclaim, not because of what they reveal about her life, but what they reveal about her writing. Mansfield's infamous jotting in her notebook sets the scene for how critics read her letters: 'True to oneself! Which self? Which of my many – well really, that's what it looks like it's coming to – hundreds of selves? (Froula et al., 2018, p. 200). She recognised that when writing a letter, an author takes on a performance, and thus that letters are not unveilings of one true self, but of many selves. Like Larkin in his novels, so Mansfield, too, explores this theme in her fictional writing. In *Prelude,* Mansfield describes how the moment a pen enters her character's hand she has to decide which self she is going to draw on today:

> Beryl sat writing this letter at a little table in her own room. In a way, of course, it was all perfectly true, but in another way it was all the greatest rubbish and she didn't believe a word of it. No, that wasn't true. She felt all those things, but she didn't really feel them like that.
> It was her other self who had written that letter. It not only bored her, it rather disgusted her real self.
> "Flippant and silly", said her real self. Yet she knew that she'd send it and she'd always write that kind of twaddle to Nan Pym. In fact, it was a very mild example of the kind of letter she generally wrote. (Mansfield, 1981, p. 57)

Here Mansfield draws on the difference between the real version and the constructed one that is placed on paper – a dynamic that is echoed in Larkin's 'Vers de Société' as the speaker considers their response when invited to a party. Like Beryl, Larkin's speaker struggles between the true self who wishes to respond, 'in a pig's arse, friend' (Burnett, 2012, pp. 91, line 3) and begins jotting, *'Dear Warlock-Williams: I'm afraid'* (6). After some careful brooding over disparity between the inner self and societal expectations, the epistolary self, in turn, replies: '*Dear Warlock-Williams: Why, of course'* (36). Like *Prelude,* Larkin's poem

demonstrates how even if the true self wanted to write something else, they are conscious of their reader, and therefore, tend to 'write the kind of letter […] generally wrote'. This conflict between the real and the epistolary is also explored in *A Girl in Winter*, as we have seen. Therefore, I would argue that Mansfield is indeed present in Larkin's second novel (as Ingelbien suggests) but that it is her letter writing that is the focus of Larkin's aim, not Mansfield herself. Moreover, C.K Stead states that after Mansfield's death 'the poems were reprinted once but interest in them was slight […] and were allowed to lapse. Her letters on the other hand, were widely read and admired' (Stead, 1977, p. 12). They were indeed read and admired, not just by Larkin and schoolfriend James Sutton, but more particularly by Larkin and Monica Jones. In *their* letters, her significance prevails.

In October 1951, Larkin sent Jones an edition of Katherine Mansfield's letters. Discussing the 'stories v. the personalia' of Mansfield, Larkin places his inclinations firmly in the personal: 'I wd sooner read her journals etc than many of the stories' (Larkin to Jones, 6 October 1951, p. 60). A few days preceding this, Larkin writes to Jones analysing Mansfield's correspondence with her significant other, John Middleton Murry:

> *The* fact about them (how nasty my writing is this morning) is that they're love letters – 'all I write or ever will write will be the fruit of our love' – and so instead of a series of brilliant 'sketches' you have the whole plant, roots, stalk & flowers. In a way the 'love' doesn't get over to me – inhibited, I suppose, by knowing that it's J.M.M. who's the recipient – but alas there *is* something suspect about it – it's perfect, & therefore untrue, of the imagination only – but I long to know what you think of them: you may see them more clearly than I. But being given the whole plant makes me critical. (Larkin to Jones, 15 September 1951, p. 57).

Rather than falling into the trap of assuming that Mansfield's love letters unveil her true self, for Larkin it is this style of letter where art truly prevails. For him, they are too forced to ever be deemed as honest or real. Larkin is not fooled by the hyperbole, but rather uses Mansfield's letters to Murry to expose her ability to adopt personae. Interestingly, the 'love'

element presented in Larkin's letters to Jones follow a similar thread to those of Mansfield to Murry. First and foremost, the most striking similarity is their name calling. Writing to one another, Mansfield called herself 'Wig' and Murry 'Tig' – which continues throughout both correspondences – just like the Seal and Bun found in *Letters to Monica*. Gillian Boddy's particularly apt description of Mansfield's correspondence with Murry perfectly accords with what we see in Larkin's correspondence with Jones:

> The many endearments, nicknames and abbreviations would seem sentimental to some readers but the letters were, after all, part of their private world – the conversation between two people escaping from a reality that could not always be easily endured'. (Boddy, 1988, p. 140)

Just as Mansfield and Murry constructed their own private world of 'Tig' and 'Wig', so did Larkin and Jones. From the reviews of Larkin's *Letters to Monica*, this private world has been read as intimate and genuine, as they 'seem sentimental', but their primary role within their correspondence is to allow both Jones and Larkin to step out of the restraints of reality and live in their own constructed domesticity within the epistolary. Moreover, this domesticity found in the Larkin-Jones correspondence has echoes of Mansfield's: 'Katherine admired his [Murry's] housekeeping by post from a distance. Both preferred make-believe to actual domesticity in a perennial love affair largely made up of partings and reunions' (Spurling, 1983). It is no secret for Larkin scholars that Larkin favoured his solitude over marriage. However, that did not stop him from dipping his toe into the realms of domesticity: 'I have just darned 2 pairs of socks & am sitting at my window again' (Larkin to Jones, 7 October 1950, Hull History Centre Ref: U DX 341/3); 'I have four rolls of pink toilet paper on my low table, more or less at my elbow, but their only significance is that I've been too lazy to put them away' (Larkin to Jones, 26 November 1959, Thwaite, 2011, p. 261). However, like Mansfield and Murry, the letter was the vehicle which allowed their domestication to remain make-believe:

> Truly I shall always remember the fireplace & the cricket-bin & all the battery of things on the mantel piece, Fifi & blue Neddy & the flowered lamp. Your life there has come into extremely sharp focus for me *now*: heating milk, singing in the kitchen, drying stockings, etc'. (Larkin to Jones, 1 October 1950, p. 10)

By visiting Jones' home in reality, it allowed Larkin further into the imaginative realms of domesticity that they could co-exist in through the letters.

Their names of endearment and imaginative homemaking are not the only similarities between Mansfield's and Larkin's epistolary worlds, however. Boddy when dissecting the Mansfield-Murry correspondence, remarks how 'one of their greatest shared pleasures was their work. She [Katherine] saw them both as artists […] she respected his criticism of her work although not always agreeing with it' (Boddy, 1988, p. 142). This reminds us of Thwaite's introduction to *Letters to Monica* as he notes: 'What is particularly fascinating is the sharing with Monica of progress (or otherwise) on particular poems. To begin with, what he shows her are completed poems […] later his privately printed pamphlet […] later, still, he tries out drafts of his poems on her, asking for her comments' (Thwaite, 2011, p. xi). Arguably, this could just be a coincidence that two separate love affairs discussed mutual passions of writing, but a letter written from Jones to Larkin suggests otherwise. In fact, Jones confirms Mansfield's influence over their epistolary writing: 'I'm touched and amused to see how, always, a little of KM shakes a letter out of you to me – it does, doesn't it? […] *I* know when she's writing the truth & when she's making it up, I've done it all myself' (Jones to Larkin 3 November 1954, p. 127). The insights in this letter are twofold: firstly, as readers we can identify Jones' perceptive awareness of Larkin's self-caricaturing based on Mansfield's words. Secondly, it nods towards the fictitious nature of letter writing from both sides. Here lies Jones' own admission that her letters are not entirely honest. This is interesting in that for years, *Letters to Monica* have been read as intimate, honest and true, yet by the recipient's own admission, this is not the case. Jones' comment acknowledges how letters allow us to catapult ourselves out of reality and into fiction. Larkin's letters to her –

and hers to him – are just as fictional as the letters written to Amis or Gunner, for example, and identify Larkin's ability to adopt personae dependent on his reader. In fact, in 2021, John Sutherland – a man who knew Jones personally – recognises that he did not know the Jones that existed in her and Larkin's constructed world:

> At the heart of this book, and my reason for writing it, is an acquaintance with Monica Jones over a decade in which my life was changed by her. I am in two minds: which one is more real? The Monica I knew as a young man in the 1960s? Or the Monica I now know from the thousands of pages of manuscript documentation, sixty years on? (Sutherland, 2021, p. 1)

Sutherland's questions perfectly encapsulate for readers the extent to which Jones and Larkin's letters were part of their epistolary world, one that they were able to step in and out of from their everyday, domestic reality.

Littered throughout their letters are sketches drawn by Larkin presenting Jones as a Rabbit and himself as a Seal – both of which contribute to the fictitious nature of the letters. The illustrations are illuminating in that we can decipher how Larkin viewed Jones and himself in Rabbithood. By this I mean that the drawings remove the letters from the serious and place them on the cusp of storytelling. On 7 June 1951, Larkin began a letter, 'Dear Graminivore', accompanied by a sketch of a rabbit cooking in a domestic setting. He then goes on to tell Jones what he is visualising before inviting her to join him in the epistolary world: 'I'm not sure what you are *doing* in this picture apart from preparing supper. However, I'm sure you are comfortably off. Do you think you should have whiskers, or not? My whiskers are an integral part of me' (Larkin to Jones, 7 June 1951, Thwaite, 2011, p. 42). Firstly, we have the zoomorphosis of 'graminivore' – a change from 'bun' or 'rabbit' as Larkin never addressed Jones by her actual name. Secondly, the opening sentence illuminates to the reader that Larkin is imagining Jones, like a character in a story. If we focus on the drawing itself, however, it allows us see the role Jones plays in Larkin's fictitious letters. As we know, a few

months earlier Larkin wrote to her to tell her how he imagined her: 'Your life there has come into extremely sharp focus for me *now*: heating milk, singing in the kitchen, drying stockings, etc' (Larkin to Jones, 1 October 1950, p. 10). This drawing reiterates that message, only the Jones of reality is not present but rather her epistolary presentation is: Jones is presented as a rabbit in a kitchen setting; she is wearing a skirt and sandals, holding a frying pan over a stove and a wooden spoon in hand. She is looking at a table, as if to see what ingredients she will add next. The kitchen includes a table, and beside the table are pans and kitchen utensils hanging on the wall, with a plethora of vegetables arranged beneath. We can infer from this sketch that Jones is no longer Monica Jones the person but rather a character in these letters, and her story lives on. In the edition of *Letters to Monica,* the number of illustrations that are included is minimal. However, we can conclude from those that are present that Jones is continuously sketched as a female rabbit, wearing a below the knee length skirt, and predominantly in a domestic setting. From the letters explored in the archives at the Hull History Centre and the Bodleian Library, we can identify that all the letters are littered with illustrations of the same drawing. When Larkin writes to Jones, the letter is always accompanied with a sketch. To quote a few, on 1 November 1951, Larkin discusses the topic of sex, describing it as 'CARRYING ON THE RACE' and this precedes his drawing: 'Now I expect you will pluck out yr fur-bound English Book of Common Prayer and repeat this entire passage from some ceremony I have never become acquainted with' (Larkin to Jones, 1 November 1951, p. 68). The drawing presents this very scene: Jones the Rabbit is holding her book pointing at Larkin beginning to read from a passage in the book, as the Seal [Larkin] cowers down feeling somewhat regretful for what he has said (p. 68). In 1955, he writes: 'Nearly zero hour. Feel *fairly* nervous. I hate these occasions […] I wonder are you similarly waiting?' (Larkin to Jones, 15 August 1955, p. 177). The letter is accompanied by a drawing of a rabbit sat on a rug, hunched over in what looks like nervous tension, patiently waiting by

the radio. Arguably, these diminutive sketches add to the intimacy of their letters. However, I would argue that they also contribute to the overall literariness of the letters – like Mansfield's and Murry's. These drawings encourage us as readers to recognise how Larkin was envisaging and imagining his reader and giving them a role within the letters. The second letter, written on 15 August 1955, in particular, illuminates to us that Larkin did imagine Jones in scenarios but that by sketching her as a rabbit rather than a person, it transports that image from reality to the imagination.

In their shared epistolary world of domesticity, the concept of children remained abhorrent. Like the attitudes towards women found in the Larkin-Amis correspondence, Larkin's negative attitudes towards children pervade the Larkin-Jones correspondence. As these comments are mirrored in his interviews and poetry, they add to the impression that it was with Jones that Larkin was his true self. However, just as we have seen in Part I where Larkin exaggerated his masculinity to suit his reader Amis, here with Jones the negative attitude towards children is arguably for his readers benefit as well. That is not to say that these comments are not true, but it is to recognise that within their constructed world, Larkin presented a version of himself in his letters to Jones that is contradicted in letters elsewhere.

'Children are very horrible, aren't they?'

Although the 'confessional' nature found in Larkin's *Letters to Monica* may have significantly contributed to the assumption that in these letters we find the 'real' Larkin, one other reason why the letters may have been regarded as biographical is because there seems little disparity between the public Larkin that we meet in interviews and essays and the Larkin whom we are introduced to as he pens out a letter to Jones. The letters written to her do resemble some of the famous attitudes that we know Larkin for today – his fear of death, his dislike of marriage, his disdain for children. However, as this study has continued to

demonstrate, Larkin's comments are not entirely trustworthy, and neither are his letters to Jones.

From both the poetry and the publication of *Selected Letters,* it is no secret that Larkin did harbour some misanthropic tendencies; Larkin has, as we know, been labelled sexist and as having a poor attitude towards women. To reiterate, this attitude was so strong that it permitted Motion to create sub-categories in the index to his biography of Larkin: 'fear of marriage'; 'attitude to women'; 'attitude to girls'. However, another interesting sub-category was 'attitude towards children', a so-called aversion that Larkin had, yet which has had little serious critical engagement to date. Whilst this negative attitude towards children is indeed present in *Letters to Monica,* this thesis will explore these attitudes as part of their epistolary world rather than as an insight into Larkin's inner thoughts and feelings.

Interestingly, across the 524 pages of Motion's biography, there are only a small number of occasions where Motion makes reference to Larkin's attitude towards children. Firstly, he draws on Larkin's interview with Miriam Gross:

> Well, I didn't much like other children. Until I grew up I thought I hated everybody, but when I grew up I realised that it was just children I didn't like. Once you started meeting grown-ups life was much pleasanter. Children are horrible, aren't they? Selfish, noisy, cruel, vulgar little brutes. (Larkin, 1982, p. 48)

Discussing Larkin's 1959 review of *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* by Iona and Peter Opie, Motion writes: 'children were especially threatening. He felt that if his wife were to allow him any time to himself, children would immediately invade it. The prospect horrified him, and his revulsion became notorious' (Motion, 1993, p. 119). The review itself reveals a strong aversion towards children: 'It was that verse about becoming again as a little child that caused the first sharp waning of my Christian sympathies. If the Kingdom of Heaven could be entered only by those fulfilling such a condition I knew I should be unhappy

there' (p. 119). He furthers this by reinforcing the impression that an eternity in company with other children was possibly the worst concept he could ever encounter:

> It was not the prospect of being deprived of money, keys, wallet, letters, books, long-playing records, drinks, the opposite sex, and other solaces of adulthood that upset me (I should have been about eleven), but having to put up indefinitely with the company of other children, their noise, their nastiness, their boasting, their back-answers, their cruelty, their silliness'. (p. 119)

Elsewhere, in an interview with John Haffenden, Larkin does not exactly overwhelm us with paternal instincts: 'I speak as a childless person: I've never lived in hideous contact with them, having toast flung about at breakfast and so on. Perhaps worse than toast. The whole doctrine of original sin implies that children are awful, don't you think?' (Thwaite, 2001, p. 48). Motion, among many others, would undoubtedly arrive at the conclusion from these extracts that Larkin did indeed detest children. However, let us pause for a moment and consider the possibility that this may also, once again, have been a self-conscious persona adopted to suit his public image. When we look at some of Larkin's poetry surrounding children, it does indeed echo the comments made in the interviews and criticism. His famous 'This be the Verse' springs to mind with that iconic last line: 'And don't have any kids yourself' (Burnett, 2012, pp. 88, line 12). But he also mused over the concept in other poems as well. In 'Self's the Man', the speaker compares his bachelorhood to the married figure in the poem, who has to give all his money 'to pay for the kiddies' clobber' (p.59, line 7) which indeed correlates with Larkin's public statements. Yet if we look at Larkin's attitude towards children in his letters to Jones and contrast his attitude here with that displayed in letters to other correspondents (who do not appear in *Selected Letters*), his manipulation of personae is self-evident and suggests that Larkin's letters to Jones should be seen as sites of epistolary fiction rather than as windows onto Larkin's soul.

After a visit to Amis in 1956, Larkin writes a seething letter to Jones iterating his frustration with Kingsley's kids: 'Swansea struck me as a nice town, pleasantly diversified with hills & residential areas of nineteenth century houses […] The children were there quite a lot: Philip & Martin are quite nice little boys by now, Sally *ingenuously loathsome*' (Larkin to Jones, 26 August 1956, p. 205). Of course, this resembles Larkin's attitude towards children displayed in his criticism and poetry. However, the letters received from Hilly Amis regarding her and Amis' children invite us to revise our preconceptions. Unfortunately, Larkin's letters to Hilly have not survived, but her replies provide us with an opportunity to infer his attitude towards her children. In 1949, Hilly responds to Larkin after he sends gifts for the boys: 'How nice of you to send our vile children the gift […] I'm always needing things for them from Boots, so it's the best thing you could have done. I shall keep the lovely little sketches forever & ever along with the maternal creatures' (Hilly Amis to Larkin, 30 December 1949, Hull History Centre. Ref: U DPL3/1/3). The self-mocking 'vile children' reflects the sarcastic nature found in the letter exchange between Kingsley and Larkin - a joke that Hilly herself was in on. She is mocking Larkin's use of derogatory hyperbole to describe children publicly, but privately the letter indicates that he was thoughtful in not only buying gifts but drawing sketches for them in the letter. Although we cannot see the letter, given what we know about Larkin's drawings and use Creature to Jones and to his mother (which will we visit in Part III, 'The Tale of the Creature'), we can assume that they are not entirely different. Moreover, Larkin did not only buy the Amis children gifts; he had a bigger role in their family than he would publicly care to admit: 'I [Hilly] was very glad it was a boy & also very glad that we are calling him Philip after you. I only hope he'll live up to the name' (Hilly Amis to Larkin, 21 August 1948). It seems unlikely that either Hilly or Kingsley would call their second born after a man who had a strong aversion towards children. If we return to the letter written to Jones, we recall that Larkin did admit that the boys were likeable,

although he called Sally 'loathsome'. However, one must question why Larkin would dedicate his poem 'Born Yesterday' to Sally Amis only two years earlier? From his letter to Jones, it would appear that Larkin wrote the poem for Hilly Amis rather than for himself. However, once again a letter received from Hilly is illuminating in that to her, he presented an entirely different version of himself than he presented to Jones:

> As usual one of the nicest things about having a baby is the letter or card & creature I get from you, but this time – to the almost overwhelming joy of having Sally I get your lovely letter, creatures, *and* the poem for her, I was quite overcome when Kingsley read it to me. It's the most beautiful personal poem I've ever read, and I've put it in my special box of letters & things, to keep for her. It's the nicest thing you could have done. (Hilly Amis to Larkin, 20 January 1954)

The Larkin that Hilly Amis appeared to know was exceptionally different the persona he presents to Jones. Describing Sally Amis originally as 'loathsome' to Jones, to Hilly, Larkin appears to have been quite thoughtful. He has once again drawn creatures and sketches on the letter which he knew would impress Hilly Amis. Moreover, her wording 'as usual' and the emphasis that she places on the word 'and' suggest that Larkin has done this more than once. It was not just with Hilly Amis that Larkin presented a different attitude towards children than he did with Jones, however. In fact, he drew upon this persona with several other women in his life.

In a letter written to Jones, Larkin kept his sneering disdain towards children when referring to Judy Egerton's daughter, Bridget:

> Judy has been to Italy & seen Bridget, & Bridget's boy friends, who don't sound encouraging – travelling salesmen, electricians, Lebanese students. It all seems a plain case of stupid English girl being bashed by low Eyties (on their side), and the old love-of-freedom, youth, escape from home to romantic foreign countries on hers (Larkin to Jones, 7 June 1970, Thwaite, 2011, p. 409)

In his biography, Booth notes that, 'his [Larkin's] comments on children show a particularly revealing clash between self-dramatization and reality' (Booth, 2014, p. 10). He draws the

reader's attention to the negative attitudes towards children that Larkin demonstrates in his interviews, as we have seen with Gross and Haffenden, where Larkin implies a loathing for children, and then undermines this negative impression by quoting a letter Larkin wrote to Bridget Egerton. The letter is, as Booth describes, 'decorated with comic sketches of a rabbit and himself in a bow-tie' (p. 11). Analysing both the sketch and content of the letter, Booth concludes that 'he makes his handwriting round and distinct for her youthful eye' (p. 11). Once again, we have Larkin committing an act of kindness towards a child rather than verbalising his hatred. Moreover, like the Amis children, Larkin did not forget the important dates: 'Dear Bridget. This is a present for your birthday, to wear in Switzerland. I hope you have a splendid time and ski all over the place'. In this same letter, he also included a sketch of her skiing, wearing the hat he bought for her, adding a personal touch to the note. If we compare these letters to his comment to Jones, describing Bridget as a 'stupid English girl', it leaves our readings problematic and we are unsure of which Larkin to trust. Moreover, this clash between seemingly contradictory personae further undermines the authenticity of the opinions Larkin expressed towards children in his letters to Jones. That is not to say that those written to Bridget Egerton are true. Rather, the letters demonstrate that Larkin adapted his persona dependent on his reader.

In his letters about his niece Rosemary, Larkin's postured disdain towards children is transparently clear. In 1947, he writes to Jones with dread for the following day: 'My sister's coming tomorrow with her young spring (or hell-spawn as I call it sometimes) to whom, I did in the event, stand Godfather, and a hypocritical ceremony it was (Larkin to Jones, 22 August 1947, Hull History Centre, Ref: U DX 341). In later years, his attitude towards Rosemary in his letters to Jones had not changed:

> You'll be amused to hear that my sister, ill in bed so that my mother had to be fetched to get food for Walter & Rosemary, nevertheless managed to rise from the sickbed to attend a dress rehearsal involving the last-named. God, that my skirling laughter were

> a flame-thrower to extinguish such a nest of stupidity (Larkin to Jones, 11 February 1961, Thwaite, 2011, p. 276)

His letter resembles the disdain towards married life that we see in poems such as 'Self's the Man'. Larkin mocks the fact that his sister's life revolves around her daughter rather than living in solitude like himself. On another occasion after a visit home, he writes to Jones: 'Rosemary was interrupting and correcting everyone, and (at the age of nearly 16) insisting on her usual childish games. Honestly I don't think I did anything I wanted ALL DAY except go to the lavatory. Their presents to us were miserable' (Larkin to Jones, 26 December 1962, p. 314). His attitude towards Rosemary that he presents to Jones is evidently dismissive and unloving. However, once again contradictions prevail. In his Memoirs, interestingly, Kingsley Amis reflects on his first encounter with Rosemary:

> I remember with amusement how that earlier meeting had not been part of the plan, how Philip had always said he could not stand children and had not got on with his niece, then aged seven or eight, and how he had been moderately disconcerted by her obvious pleasure at seeing him again. (Amis, 2004, p. 63)

Though he does not say it outright, Amis' musing suggests that he suspected that there was another side to Larkin than the one presented to him. Moreover, if we zoom in on the fact that Larkin had been 'moderately disconcerted' by this encounter, it suggests to us that Larkin was aware of his facility for role playing and here felt caught out by a meeting which 'had not been part of the plan'. By this I mean that he did not want any blurring of the lines between correspondents – he did not want Amis to be aware that he was not as derogatory towards his niece as he may have indicated. We already know that the driver of the Larkin-Amis correspondence is a bravado competition of misogyny and misanthropy, so the revelation of a delicate nature towards family would have been entirely unacceptable. Nonetheless, Amis' amusement at Larkin's obvious discomfort speaks volumes about the many roles Larkin plays with correspondents, and his letters to Jones are no different.

Having explored the letters from Hilly Amis, the letters to Bridget Egerton, and the contradictions surrounding Larkin's attitude towards his niece Rosemary, we can now see why it is problematic to assume that Larkin's letters to Jones should be read as literal biographical statements or diary entries. We must recognise the self-dramatization that is present in all of Larkin's letters. More importantly, we must recognise the relationship between the writer and the reader. Here, Larkin is clearly presenting a different version of himself to Jones that he does not employ to others. They are not, as Thwaite suggests, letters that reveal Larkin's most intimate and personal thoughts but rather are a demonstration of his and Jones' own constructed epistolary world. The letter allowed them to step out of the reality and create their own epistolary world of domesticity that did not involve marriage or children.

Conclusion

Part II of this thesis has primarily focused on Larkin's letters to Monica Jones. Thwaite's 2010 edition, *Letters to Monica* was a pivotal publication for Larkin scholarship. Here, it was thought that this new ground-breaking book revealed the true Larkin – one that was able to defend against the more negative allegations that were placed against him in 1992. This edition was presented as the key to Larkin's soul; it was claimed to contain letters where Larkin poured out his most intimate thoughts and feelings to the most important correspondent in his life. However, as this part has demonstrated, Larkin performed in his letters to Jones in the same way that he did to all his other correspondents.

This was first evidenced by employing Larkin's own criticism of other writers that demonstrated an awareness and acknowledgement of the performativity in letters. Moreover, it encapsulated the untrustworthiness of both letter writing and the editing process. Larkin

recognises in his critique of other writers the distance between the reality and the persona they drew upon on the page.

This distance between reality and the imagined worlds of letter writing was further emphasised through exploration of Larkin's second novel *A Girl in Winter*. This novel demonstrates clearly the difference between the persona a writer puts on paper and the person that they present in their daily lives. Moreover, this part drew upon *A Girl in Winter* to demonstrate how letter writers can become so consumed by their imaginary worlds that when reality pierces through it can have devastating consequences.

The next section of this part, 'Rabbithood', unpicked the conflict between the real and fictional spheres in Larkin and Jones' correspondence. Both their letters demonstrate self-awareness of their inability to live up to how each of them has presented themselves through the epistle. Instead, it seems safer for them to remain hinged between the creational and the actual, playing their role of Rabbit and Seal rather than to return to Larkin and Jones.

The world Larkin and Jones construct was then further examined by drawing upon the letters of Katherine Mansfield. Throughout their correspondence, as we have seen, Larkin and Jones expressed a curiosity with, and admiration for, Mansfield's letters. Moreover, their own construction of Rabbit and Seal echoes the epistolary dynamic between Mansfield and Murry who defined themselves as Tig and Wig. The echoes of this literary influence over Larkin and Jones' letters places the letters firmly in the fictional realm and moves them further away from the realm of the biographical. Within these imagined realms, Larkin and Jones construct an imaginary world of domesticity – through sketches of rabbits, household settings and the language used within these letters.

The final section of Part II returns to the biographical readings of Larkin's attitude towards children. It demonstrates how in his letters to Jones, Larkin unveiled a disdain

towards children – a disdain which can also be found in his interviews. However, in order to argue against the supposed authenticity of these letters, I drew upon letters from Hilly Amis and to Bridget Egerton that present Larkin's seemingly very different attitude towards children. Moreover, I also explored Larkin's varying attitudes towards his niece Rosemary that further complicate the sentiments Larkin expressed in his letters to Jones. By doing so, this part has clearly demonstrated the unreliability of Larkin's letters to Jones as insights into his life, instead reinforcing them as literary constructs.

Part II has concluded that Larkin's letters to Jones do not unveil Larkin's most intimate thoughts and feelings. Instead, they reveal Larkin and Jones' intimate and private epistolary world. Larkin's correspondence with Jones is not the only one to be read as 'intimate' or indeed as the unveiling of the real Larkin, however. More recently, in 2018 Larkin's *Letters Home* have been presented as the most illuminating to date. However, as this Part has demonstrated, Larkin's intimate persona is more revealing in exposing the epistolary worlds he constructs than it is in exposing details of his inner self. *Letters Home* is no exception to the rule as we will see as we now turn to Part III.

Part III: *Letters Home*

Prelude

The letters, affectionate and humorous, frequently accompanied by Larkin's doodles / drawings confirm that the closest relationship in Philip's life was his bond with his mother. At the same time, they are a very clear insight into the life of the most appreciated English poet of the mid-twentieth century. (Finchan, 2019, p. 112)

The book [Letters Home] *is well worth having because we see a side of Larkin little glimpsed until now: not the friend and lover but the determinedly loyal, long-suffering son.* (Morrison, 2018)

Though his personal misery may have been deepening all the while, these letters bring to mind not the "coastal shelf" of his most famous poem, but something far softer, and altogether more benevolent. Here, like it or not, is love. It survives him, a better garland by far than a pile of old socks. (Cooke, 2018)

Introduction

The final part of the thesis explores the most recent edition of letters to be published: *Philip Larkin: Letters Home 1936-1977* (2018). Once again, this edition unveils yet another version of Larkin, and as we can note from the reviews in the Prelude, this edition has also been thought to reveal the 'true' Larkin. However, at this point it is needless to say that this project will not be reading this edition as revealing the 'real' Larkin. Rather, it will draw on his largest body of correspondence to reinforce how Larkin used the letter to escape reality and live in between two worlds. Part III will, as Parts I and II have already done, begin by exploring the editor's presentation of Larkin. Following this, Part III will differ slightly from the previous two parts: Parts I and II explored Larkin's attitudes toward letter writing and drew upon his literary texts to evidence the fictionality of Larkin's letters. Part III will predominantly focus on the letters themselves. In *Letters Home*, Larkin's ability to adopt personae is more apparent than in any preceding edition. Therefore, rather than introducing another case study drawn from fiction, the performativity in these letters will be allowed to speak for themselves. Firstly, by drawing on Larkin's letters 'to fambly' (Sydney, Eva and Kitty Larkin), they will demonstrate how Larkin was able to adapt his role within one letter to suit three individual readers. Secondly, I will delve into Larkin's most extensive

correspondence, and focus on the individual persona created for his mother Eva. Thirdly, I will consider Larkin's illustrations in his letters home (although these are included in *Letters to Monica* and discussed in Part II, it is in *Letters Home* that their significance is most illuminating) and demonstrate how Larkin constructed the character of the Creature to allow him and his mother to live in a fictional epistolary world. Moreover, I will explore how this obviously fictional construct was then transferred across to Larkin's other correspondence with women. Finally, I will complete this section with a reading of Larkin's poetry – the poetry that demonstrates a desire to step out of reality and live in the imagination. These readings will be a recognition of how art, poetry and indeed letters allow you to step out of your reality and be transported to another world – just as Larkin does when writing home.

Editorial Statement: Larkin III

Introducing *Letters Home*, Booth opens with a letter Larkin had written to his mother:

> Once again I am sitting in my bedroom in a patch of sunlight embarking on my weekly task of 'writing home'. I suppose I have been doing this now for 24 years! on and off, you know: well, I am happy to be able to do so, and I only hope my effusions are of some interest to you on all the different Monday mornings when they have arrived. (Larkin to Eva, 13 September 1964, Booth, 2018, p. xiii)

From the very beginning, Booth sets the tone of how central writing home was to Larkin's life: every weekend, without fail, Larkin would write to his mother, who eagerly awaited his letter and replied a number of days later. This correspondence began in 1936, shortly after Larkin moved out of his home, and started out as letters to his family before becoming an exclusive correspondence between mother and son after his father died in 1948. Larkin and Eva's epistolary relationship survived right through until 1977 – the year she died. For Booth, 'Larkin's letters home make a consistent thread throughout his life' (p. xiv). He outlines that at the beginning, Larkin would write 'at a rate of one letter a week', then by 1950 this had progressed to a 'regular Sunday letter to his mother', before finally, from 1972 onwards, 'Philip wrote to Eva most days, sometimes twice on the same day' (p. xiv). For Booth, of all

of Larkin's major correspondences, this one 'is by far the largest in volume and most extensive in duration. It dwarfs the others being twice as extensive as that with Monica Jones' (p. xiv). By presenting the edition in this way, Booth is emphasising its importance for Larkin scholarship and how these letters are the key to unlocking the twentieth-century poet.

After identifying to readers how important writing home was to Larkin, Booth quickly compares them to the earlier editions of letters. He asserts that when Thwaite 'quailed at the sight of all the shoe-boxes full of envelopes' (p. xiv) and decided to exclude the family correspondence from *Selected Letters*, 'he still had no difficulty in producing a bulky volume covering every aspect of Larkin's literary and personal life' (pp. xiv-xv). For Booth, this was an error in judgement on Thwaite's part as Larkin's correspondence with his family, and particularly with Eva, 'constitute Larkin's most intimate and committed correspondence'. Their epistolary relationship, Booth writes, 'take us to the tragic core of the poet's life' (p. xv). Once again, we have a new edition of Larkin's letters claiming to be the most momentous in what they reveal about his life. Undoubtedly, this leaves Larkin scholars questioning which editor do we believe? The editor of Larkin's letters to Monica Jones or of his letters to Eva? Or indeed, was *Selected Letters* the most accurate representation given that it selected a variety of correspondents rather than just one? If nothing else, it certainly poses the question: would our perception of Larkin have varied had the order of publications been reversed? Editorial presentation of letters is of vital importance and evidently alters and contradicts our preconceptions.

Following the almost irreversible damage to Larkin's reputation following *Selected Letters*, biographers and critics have vied to either present Larkin as nasty or nice. Booth's introduction to *Letters Home* is no exception to the rule. He draws on Larkin's letters to his family as a factual representation of his inner feelings. On one occasion, he introduces an autobiographical fragment from Larkin's workbooks written in 1953: 'I never left the house

without a sense of walking into a cooler, cleaner, saner and pleasanter atmosphere' (p. xv). However, for Booth 'the affectionate tone of his letters of the 1940s contradicts this sour recollection', drawing on a letter written on 27 May 1947 as evidence: 'Once again I have to thank you for a very happy weekend. What struck me this time was how young you both are – not young in sense of silly, but young in keen response to things' (Larkin to Sydney and Eva, 27 May 1947, p. xv). What is most curious about Booth's argument is that he is choosing to believe what is written in the letter as opposed to a note Larkin jotted down in his workbook that was meant for nobody except himself. In her thought-provoking study of biography, Hermione Lee elucidates:

> The question for the biographer of how to use letters is closely linked to the question of what to do with other autobiographical materials, like diaries and memoirs. What does a biographer do with the subject's own version of themselves? You may want to trust your subject's autobiographical narrative, but you must also bear in mind the possibility of unreliability, disguise, vanity, inauthenticity, reconstruction of the past, and deliberate, or accidental, forgetfulness. (Lee, 2015, p. 21)

Evidently, for Booth, he has prioritised Larkin's letters home for authenticity over Larkin's own autobiographical notes in his workbooks. This is interesting in that given that a letter intended to be read by someone else – in this case Larkin's family – there is a considerable chance of disguise and unreliability. I am not arguing here that the workbooks are more authentic than the letters – as Lee reminds us, *all* autobiographical information has a risk of inauthenticity and it would therefore be impossible to decipher which was true and which was false. Yet Booth, contrary to Lee's cautions, is nevertheless not only offering this edition of letters up as true, but, through the letters, is presenting Larkin as an affectionate son, and thereby presenting a 'nicer' version of Larkin.

Following the release of Motion's biography, *A Writer's Life,* Alan Bennett reviewed Larkin's relationship with his mother by drawing on a few selected letters: 'My mother is such a bloody rambling fool […] that half the time I doubt her sanity'; 'I shall become free

[of mother] at 60, three years before the cancer starts. What a bloody, sodding awful life' (Bennett, 1993). These letters, unveiled in Motion's biography, echo Larkin's poems: 'They fuck you up, your mum and dad / They may not mean to, but they do' (Burnett, 2012, pp. 88, line 1). In both his biography, *Life, Art and Love* (as we explored in Part II, pp. 119-125), and now in *Letters Home*, Booth is evidently aiming to undo the damage to Larkin's reputation by setting him up as the perfect son. Moreover, in his introduction to *Letters Home*, Booth also tackles the controversy around Larkin's racism. After depicting Larkin as a caring, affectionate and loving son, Booth acknowledges that, 'one element in this correspondence which will inevitably cause readers pause is race' (Booth, 2018, p. xl). He draws on various letters and here I will quote one example: 'Aren't you glad you don't live there? I shouldn't like a crowd of Negroes roaming around Pearson Park, or Loughborough' (Larkin to Eva, 7 April 1968, p. xl). He acknowledges that many have tried to defend Larkin's racist comments by arguing that 'such comments in his letters tend to reflect the prejudice of his particular correspondent (Amis, Conquest, Gunner, or his mother)' (p. xl), and he concludes by asserting, 'there is indeed plenty in Larkin's life and writing to contradict the charge of simple racial prejudice' (p. xl). He notes that Larkin had Jewish friends at Oxford, including Diana Gollancz and Denis Frankel (p. xl). He continues to point out that Larkin's Jazz music taste and his reviews show 'moral indignation at humiliations of the colour bar in the USA' (p. xl). He then returns to what he describes as a 'shocking' letter written to Eva in 1967: [London is] 'full of foreigners – chinks, wops, wogs, frogs, huns, the lot – and yanks, of course. Awful, awful' (p. xl), concluding that 'sometimes the contradictions in Larkin's attitudes are simply irreconcilable' (p. xl). Booth says this but then continues to talk about how Larkin sent letters to his mother discussing applicants for a position at the library: 'I shan't have the Indians', but then employs a girl from Ceylon (p. xli). Therefore, even though he notes that some of Larkin's comments are irreconcilable it would appear that he is still

trying to present a palatable version of Larkin in *Letters Home* – and we need to take this into account when considering his presentation of Larkin's letters. In a review of *Letters Home*, Robert Messenger identifies this ongoing conflict between Mr Nasty and Mr Nice as the impetus for Booth's edition:

> The issue of whether Larkin was naughty or nice has occupied critics and scholars on both sides of the Atlantic since the publication of the *Selected Letters*, edited by Anthony Thwaite, in 1992, and the official life, written by Andrew Motion, the following year. The violence of the viewpoints is extreme. And there is plenty of evidence for Larkin as misogynist or racist. There is also good evidence for him as a kind colleague and doting lover. It is all utterly irrelevant. (Messenger, 2019)

Booth's most striking defence is when he claims that Larkin's distasteful views reflect those of his recipients – Amis, Conquest, Gunner and his mother – rather than tell us something of his own. Here, we do have an acknowledgement by Booth that Larkin performs in his letters, but once again, as he does in *Life, Art and Love*, Booth chooses himself to interpret what is fact and what is fiction. He depicts Larkin's affectionate, albeit 'good', side as true and then presents the obscenities in his letters as a form of fiction to please his readers. In other words, Booth is suggesting that Amis, Conquest, Gunner and Eva are all racist, but that Larkin is not – he is merely reflecting *their* views and not his own. This is certainly problematic in that we cannot prove nor disprove which letters are more biographical than others based on a librarian appointment or Jewish friends at Oxford. In this sense, when Messenger asserts that unveiling Mr Nice to undermine Mr Nasty is 'utterly irrelevant' his views are persuasive. We should not be reading Larkin's letters in an attempt to uncover which version of him is the most agreeable and base an edition of letters on that. Rather, as this thesis contends, *all* of Larkin's letters unveil different personae dependent on the reader – misogynist, racist, affectionate, child-hating, misanthrope, doting son, to name a few – and rather than searching for the 'real' Larkin, we should be exploring the letters for what they unveil

about Larkin's ability to use the letter as a pivot between reality and the epistolary worlds he created. When we explore the letters in this way, the arguments for Mr Nasty and Mr Nice become less irrelevant and more revealing of Larkin's ability to adopt a multitude of personae. Therefore, *Letters Home* is not the ground-breaking text that has finally allowed readers to understand why Larkin's childhood was 'first boredom, then fear', or why when his mother died, he constructed the elegy 'Aubade'. Instead, it is ground-breaking in that it helps us to confirm that Larkin's letters are a 'tremendous mixture of truth and fiction'.

Although Booth does present *Letters Home* as the key to unlocking Larkin, he acknowledges - certainly more than do the earlier editions of Larkin's letters - Larkin's ability to adopt personae based on his reader: 'Despite the starkly contrasted personalities of Larkin's parents, the shared 'family' identity of the letters of the 1940s is striking' (Booth, 2018, p. xvi). During this time, Larkin's letters were written to the family, rather than writing to Sydney, Eva or Kitty individually. Booth informs us that these letters were evidently read out loud as the asides 'tell Pop that' (p. xvi) demonstrate. He argues that 'family unity was extended to cultural and social attributes' and implies that Larkin told his parents everything (p. xvii). He draws upon a letter written to the family:

> You might tell Pop that a friend of mine found an Obelisk Press Edition (i.e. unexpurgated) of 'Lady Chatterley's Lover' behind the bookcase in digs, and I am impatiently waiting for him (and his wife) to finish it. 'Mine eyes have seen the Glory of the Coming of the Lord.' (Larkin to Sydney and Eva, 15 May 1942, p. xviii)

Booth concludes with the assertion that 'it is difficult to imagine any other son of this generation writing to his mother in such a tone' (p. xviii). Though he acknowledges the subtle interchange in persona depending on who was 'listening' to these read aloud correspondences, Booth is still building a picture of truth and sincerity in *Letters Home*, and arguing that Larkin only altered his presentation slightly. Hermione Lee shares a

similar view of letter writing: 'letters are performative; but most of us behave differently with different people, and those differences and contradictions make up who we are' (Lee, 2015, p. 20). Whilst this is true, I intend to argue that Larkin's letters demonstrate a conscious decision to adopt a role for his readers rather than simply modifying his behaviour. When you separate out the correspondences, his adaption of personae becomes more illuminating.

When discussing the difference between Larkin's attitude towards Sydney and towards Eva, Booth argues that it is 'as if a gender theorist had created the letters to illustrate the performative extremes of masculine self-command on the one hand, feminine domesticity on the other' (Booth, 2018, p. xxii). He demonstrates this by documenting Larkin's letters to the family, and letters sent to Sydney or Eva individually. For Booth, Sydney's style 'was the language of a City Treasurer, dispassionate, conveying the facts' leading him to conclude that 'the first-hand objectivity of Philip's account of his experiences in wartime Oxford owes something to his father's example' (p. xxi). Throughout the discussion of Larkin and Sydney's correspondence, Booth's introduction is littered with comments on or about Larkin's epistolary adaptions such as, 'Larkin also learned from his father his meticulous grammar, spelling and syntax', he was 'complementing his father's style' (p. xxii). Thus, Booth is clearly demonstrating Larkin's ability to manipulate personae within his letters. However, his argument remains problematic: Booth concludes his exploration of the father and son correspondence by presenting Larkin, once again, as a fundamentally nice person: 'amusement and respect are blended with intimate affection' (p. xxii). The selective word-choices, 'respect', 'intimate', 'affection', contributes to the semantic field of 'loving family' that Booth wanted to create – 'Philip's parents worshipped him' (p. xxii) – and within the ideal 'loving family' comes trust, honesty, and genuine intimacy: the perfect combination for a reliable edition of letters. This ideal is consistently contradicted in Booth's edition, however. As he moves away from the Larkin-Sydney correspondence in order to explore

Larkin's letters to his mother, Booth returns once again to Larkin's adoption of personae: 'the degree to which Philip adopted Eva's attitudes is startling. She is as significant an influence on his style of letter writing as his father' (p. xxiii). Within Larkin's correspondence with Eva, we do see the theme of domesticity (as Booth pointed out) rising to the surface: 'the darning or washing of socks recur as leitmotivs from the beginning of the correspondence to the end' (p. xxiii). Booth recognises the fictionality of their correspondence: 'their letters maintain the fiction that Eva is valiantly coping with a life of enforced domestic labour' (p. xxxvi). It is here that Booth's reading almost aligns with the argument of the present thesis: 'most of the time Philip asserts to this equivalence between his and her 'work'. On a couple of occasions, however, he cannot help allowing the reality to show through' (p. xxxviii). Exactly so, Larkin's letters are always an intertwining of the worlds he creates and reality. In the case of writing to his mother, Larkin created a domestic world, one which allowed them both to share a common ground. This reading on Booth's part muddies the waters for Larkin scholars as we are left torn between accepting *Letters Home* as a true biographical insight or, as a performance. Booth continues to illuminate Larkin's adaption of himself to suit his reader:

> Generally the tone of his letters to Eva is as prosaic as hers to him. But there is a fundamental difference. Prosiness was her only option; Philip's prosaic writing is self-aware: in invisible commas as it were. Larkin was the master of unironic sincerity. (p. xxxviii)

This clearly undermines Booth's earlier assertion that *Letters Home* takes 'us to the tragic core of the poet's life' (p. xv). Booth cannot have it both ways: on the one hand he is presenting these letters as all-revealing of Larkin's relationship with his parents but at the same time as highlighting to readers that he created a fictional world for his mother where occasionally reality slipped through. Booth's introduction feels almost as though he only acknowledged the fictionality because Larkin scholarship has recognised that Larkin

played roles for different people (as we have seen in the Introduction on pages 11 and 37), but the importance of the biography found in these letters remains Booth's core thread. In many ways, Booth is correct in that there is truth in both of his arguments: the letters do reveal something of Larkin's life at the same time as they make his fictional world apparent. The issue with Booth's presentation of this lies in the fact that he presents the biographical and the fictional aspects as being almost at odds with each other: we cannot claim letters to be reliable while at the same time claiming them as unreliable. Rather, we must read Larkin's letters as he forces us to read letters in *Jill, A Girl in Winter*, 'Letter to a Friend about Girls', and his letters to Amis, Brennan, Strang, Moon and Jones: they *do* reveal some biographical insights into the life, but they reveal more about his epistolary ability to live in between reality and the fictional worlds he creates for all his correspondents.

What further distinguishes Booth's edition from Thwaite's *Selected Letters* and *Letters to Monica* is Booth's decision to concentrate on the illustrations as well as on the writing. In his letters to his mother, Larkin adorns them with images of himself as 'Creature'. Booth informs his readers that Larkin's 'Creature formed itself as a distraction from the stress of revision for his final examination in 1943' and it was influenced by his Oxford friend Diana Gollancz who referred to people as 'creatures' (p. xxiv). At this moment we can reflect back to the introduction of this thesis, when Marie from *St Michaelmas Term at St Brides* opens the door to reality finding 'Creature' among other Oxford friends (cited on p. 47). Booth argues that in 1950, when he moved to Belfast, Larkin's letters entered a second phase: 'his relief at escaping the domestic proximity of the previous two years [Larkin lived with Eva before he moved to Belfast] had led to an outpouring of affection' (p. xxxii). As well as this increase in affection, 'Creature became more refined'

(p. xxxiii). However, not only did Larkin's Creature become a significant figure in his letters to Eva, Larkin also created a caricature for her as well:

> During the 1950s he experimented with various depictions of his mother with different hairstyles or wearing a hat. Sometimes he drew her as a straggly 'Mop' […] then on the last day of 1950, he hit upon the image that was to become fixed for the remainder of the correspondence, an 'old creature' distinguished from the 'young creature' by a neat mob cap. Her epistolary identity was confirmed in 1951-2 when Philip abandoned the former 'Dear Mop', 'My dear Mop' or 'Dearest old Mop', in favour of 'Dear old Creature', or 'My very dear old Creature'. (p. xxxiii)

In this second phase of affection and creation, the routine between Larkin and Eva's letter writing becomes fixed: every weekend Larkin sends a letter to his mother to ensure that it would arrive by Monday. Eva responded as regularly. By presenting the affectionate tone, the intimate drawings and the commitment to writing to his mother, Booth is once again returning to the doting son version of Larkin who confesses everything to his mother, persuading his readers to believe that this is most important relationship in Larkin's life. However, I would aver that the inclusion of the drawings alongside the increase in affection was merely Larkin creating a fictional world that both he and Eva could inhabit, allowing him to behave a certain way towards her that he would have been incapable of in reality. Booth inadvertently confirms this in his introduction: 'the formal considerateness of tone is unbroken except on a few occasions when Philip berates himself for exploding with irritation at her' (p. xxxiv). Larkin's outbursts of anger with his mother only happen when they meet up in reality, encounters during which – as we saw with Jones in Part II pp. 139-145 – Larkin's two worlds often struggled to co-exist successfully. If more evidence is needed for the significance of the drawings in terms of their epistolarity, one only needs to look at the letters to Brennan and Jones: 'he [Larkin] was later to develop images of Monica Jones and himself as rabbits, and Maeve Brennan as a mouse' (p. xxiv – xxv). However, for Booth, it is in the 'Creature drawings in the letters to his mother that his sketches are at their most varied and adventurous' (xxiv-xxv). Booth did not

emphasise their significance enough, for it is these sketches that take Larkin's letters further out of the biographical and into more fictional dimensions. The creation of the 'Creature' may have started in Larkin's letters to his mother, but the recognition that he created similar caricatures in his letters to other women in his life only further demonstrates the adaptability of epistolary Larkin depending on whom he was writing to. *Letters Home,* compared to the two previous editions of letters, includes significantly more drawings which help demonstrate Larkin's persona more clearly and allow us to recognise the various ways in which Larkin stepped in and out of reality. So, whilst Booth could have explored their significance further, he must be recognised for highlighting the significance of these illustrations. He shows readers, for the first time, the roles that Larkin's sketches have played in his letters all along. This thesis will add to this significant contribution to Larkin scholarship later in this section by exploring the illustrations – including some hitherto unpublished by Booth – in more detail.

Finally, though the focus of *Letters Home* is primarily on Larkin's letters to Eva, and before 1948 his epistolary relationship with his father, it must be acknowledged that Larkin did send letters home to his sister, Kitty. Booth informs his readers that sadly 'only twenty-nine of his early letters and cards to Kitty survive' (p. xxvi). For Booth, these letters 'show Philip at his most empathetic, praising his sister's ideas and asking her advice on artistic and theatrical matters' (xxvi). Once again, we have a recognition that Larkin has altered his persona to suit his reader. Furthermore, and similar to the methods he adopts with his mother and Jones, Larkin often alters between names when addressing his sister: 'she is addressed in various letters as 'K', 'Kit', 'Kath', 'Kathryn', 'Katherine' and 'Katharine'' (p. xxvii). Rather than a 'teasing intimacy', as Booth labels it, I would aver that this further demonstrates Larkin's creation of fictional worlds that he allows some of his correspondents to inhabit with him. Larkin needed to establish firstly who he

was going to be, then who Kitty should be, before embarking on a correspondence that projects 'a high-spirited aestheticism and artiness' (p. xxvii).

Booth's presentation of Larkin in *Letters Home* differs drastically from how Thwaite chose to present Larkin in *Selected Letters* and *Letters to Monica*. In this sense, Booth has contributed significantly to the Larkin scholarship in recognising that his letters are not solely biographical. Moreover, he identifies Larkin's ability to adapt his epistolary self to suit his reader. However, within Booth's introduction, there still remains a core assumption that this version of Larkin's epistolary self is the final and most 'authentic' version that Larkin's letters reveal. In some ways it is - how it demonstrates the literariness of Larkin's letters; how it causes us to revise our earlier preconceptions of Larkin based on previous editions; how Booth draws on the importance of the illustrations. Nonetheless, the constant referral to the intimacy and close relationship between Larkin and his family, particularly Eva, tends to undermine the fictionality of this correspondence – instead bringing the perception of *Letters Home* as factual biography to the fore. The remainder of this section intends to redress these assumptions by focusing on the literary qualities of *Letters Home*. It demonstrates how Larkin's letters home, from 1936 until 1977, acted as a door for Larkin to hinge between what is real and what he chose to construct in his correspondence with members of his immediate family.

To Fambly: Mop, Pop, and Kitty

As documented in *Letters Home*, Larkin began writing home in 1936. To introduce the selection of letters, Booth includes one letter written to Kitty on 24 August 1936 before moving to 1939. The inclusion of his one letter to Kitty is significant – not because it identifies the year that Larkin began writing home, but that it demonstrates how Larkin used the epistle from the very beginning: 'Thank you very, very, much for the dance band report […] they sound lovely. Bands here are lousy, except one I saw on Saturday evening in

Cologne, personnel: BASS & TRAMBONE: SAX & VIOLIN: VIOLIN & CLAR: TRUMPET & CELLO. PIANO DRUMS' (Larkin to Kitty, 24 August 1936, Booth, 2018, p. 3). Larkin's letters to Kitty explored aestheticism, art and music, as Booth elucidates in his introduction. However, the exploration of these topics is less important in revealing their shared interests, than in illuminating how his letters to Kitty demonstrate an art and aestheticism in themselves. The literary quality of his letters to his sister reinforces that Larkin was not merely corresponding with his sister but using the letter to trial out his own literary talent: 'between tea & dinner (7.00 or 7.15 it varies) is quite a fruitful time for work. The night has fallen & the fire chuckles in the grate' (Larkin to Kitty, 31st October 1940, p.20); 'from the lawned quads of Oxford the sky is blue, slim clouds tinged salmon by the low sun in the east. Smoke rises from the chimneys and the birds argue in the college garden. General morning peace presides overall' (Larkin to Kitty, 23 November 1940, p.28). Larkin's choice of verbs and adjectives, and most notably, his use of anthropomorphism moves these letters out of a typical letter to your sister listing daily activities and transports them to a more literary realm. Larkin predominantly sent letters of this nature in the early 1940s, when he was a novice writer who was just embarking on his university course at Oxford. From the very beginning of his letter writing, we can identify Larkin using the letter as a platform for creativity:

> At present it is 8.28 p.m., and snowin' 'ard. On every cornice, crag, gargoyle, ledge, and bit of dog-tooth moulding in Oxford snow settles. In the High 'buses run silently: down the Broad rectangles of light fall across the wide pavements from the lodges of Balliol & Trinity. Further away, south-east down St. Aldates, gusts of snow blow past Big Tom and away onto the Meadows, where are no footprints; and south-west by the river flakes in the quadrangles of Magdalen. And in hundreds of brightly lit rooms, or solitary by reading-lamps, hundreds of undergraduates smoke, read, talk and laugh, oblivious of the outer dark but part of it, forgetful of all but a tiny section of living but influenced by life and its implications, as am I, sprawled on the sofa in St. John's College, a pad on my knees and my feet on the fireplace, writing to you. (Larkin to Kitty, 5 February 1941, pp. 36-7)

He concludes this descriptive prose piece by seeking Kitty's approval on his fictitious ability: 'there is a nice little literary description of the scene for you. Tell me if you like it. It's quite easy' (p.37). Though there are not many letters written to Kitty that survive, these early letters are crucial in demonstrating how, at the beginning, Larkin used the letter as an avenue for prose practice (inevitably for his novels *Jill* and *A Girl in Winter* which he would go on to write). Secondly, in the same letters, as mentioned in the editorial statement, we can see how Larkin alternates between how he addresses Kitty. By changing her name, Larkin is immediately removing their letters from the reality of Philip and Kitty, brother and sister, to a more literary sphere where Larkin has created a place for both of them to inhabit. In this world, Larkin often employs hyperbole and dialect:

> Dear Kath,
>
> About time I answered your letter, for which ay thang yow.
>
> Firstly – I inquired, in humorous vein, what "psycology" was, because "psycology" is usually spelt "psychology". All I receive in reply is remarks about "psycology" again, and (!!) "phycology" (!!!)! Arabic news is a poor excuse for ramblings such as this!
>
> I haven't been doing much. (Pause.) There isn't much to do! (Comic Oxford!!!) I work & write letters, eat & sleep, play cards & smoke my pipe all the time. Oxford as a place is pretty gruesome. If you like "social life" – that's all right. I don't. If you like intellectual discussion – that's all right. *I* don't. If you like games, beer, & hooliganism, that's all right. *I* don't. If you like working like Hell & reading all day in the Bodleian – that's all right. *I* don't. If you like spending money, that's all right. I don't (on principle). What I want to do is to *be given* a little manual work per day, in the open air preferably, plus plenty of fruit & vegetables to eat, and with congenial & varied companions who talk very little & think less. That's all right, but you can't get it *here*!
>
> In other words, Oxford & me don't quite hit it. I thought it unlikely. (Larkin to Kitty, 10 November 1940, pp. 22-3).

This letter differs from the other letters written to Kitty in the Larkin it presents. Here, we can see a very negative, almost misanthropic version of Larkin – not entirely dissimilar to some of his letters to Amis. However, the literary employment in the letters to Kitty remains the same and undermines a biographical reading of this letter. Larkin first uses a dialect – 'ay thang yow'. Secondly, the exclamative marks when correcting Kitty's spelling are hyperbolic to demonstrate a literary superiority. Finally, in his 'rant' over his Oxford life, Larkin employs

anaphora – ‘if you like’ and ‘I don’t’ – which clearly illuminate that this letter ought to be read for how he uses the letter to trial various personae rather than being read as revealing of his life in Oxford.

Whilst the letters to Kitty demonstrate the literary nature of Larkin’s letters, the correspondence that was sent home to the ‘fambly’ more clearly highlight how Larkin was also establishing other roles for himself in his family letters from as early as 1939:

> Dear Fambly,
>
> Excuse pencil but pen is empty & I don’t feel like haggling with Belgian hotel manager about ‘de l’encre’. Thanks for both of your letters:
>
> 1. *Pop*: glad you’re enjoying Bishes tergy – he was Judas, as you probably know. He produced and wrote it all himself – bar my swingeing verse, and where is Abania anyway? I don’t know. Thanks for the Hersill instructions.
> 2. *Kit*. (Good God, I am tired – time: 11.15) sorry about ‘rollicking schoolboy’ tone of letter. I have rather been overdoing it at times, but an early night is promised tonight. (Larkin to family, Summer 1939, p.7)

When addressing ‘Pop’, Larkin demonstrates a sophistication, discussing Oxford friends and poetry (as Booth’s footnotes elucidate); whereas when addressing his sister Kitty, Larkin continues overtly to demonstrate an epistolary self-awareness, mindful of his presentation in his letters. In fact, he is aware of the type of persona he is adopting for her and immediately apologises. This is not the only letter which depicts more than one persona in one letter. After a raid in Coventry, when Larkin writes a letter home, his alternation of personae between passages addressing his mother and father respectively is striking:

> Dear fambly,
>
> Thanks for the bulky parcel of correspondence that arrived yesterday. Very sorry to here [*sic*] about Saturday's raid: it must have been hell. Jim came up on Sunday & told us what he knew, which wasn't much. So I was relieved to here [*sic*] that nobody was injured at all apud Penvorn.
>
> To answer Mop first: at present we are using Hughes' "toilet cover" which is as bad as mine in a different way – silky and très chic. As for the rest of the paraphernalia, the coffee strainer is *invaluable*. Ours are the only rooms in Oxford where coffee free from choking grounds can be drunk. Work – as yet – is rather tentative. One might as well try to work in a hotel. So far – I am warm. I have the eiderdown on the bed which is also invaluable.

> Now for Pop: Thanks for the poems, & the addresses. The latter look fishy to me, bar "new verse" – rather too traditional. You see, a traditional paper would never print a modernist poem. Still, I'll try. (Larkin to Family, 15 October 1940, p.13)

When corresponding with his mother, Larkin evidently adopts a domesticated persona; one who indulges in house materials and takes great pride in it. However, the repetition of 'invaluable' seems overstated when discussing a coffee strainer and an eiderdown. As Booth notes, the letters between Larkin and Eva 'maintain the fiction that Eva is valiantly coping with a life of enforced domestic labour' (p. xxxvi) and concludes that 'most of the time Philip asserts to this equivalence between his and her 'work' (p. xxxviii). This is certainly evident in the later letters, as we shall see, but clearly in the earlier letters this theme of shared domesticity was forming, and Larkin was establishing the roles that he and Eva would adopt when embarking on their own correspondence. Meanwhile, he was also establishing the roles he and Sydney would play. Similar to the letter written in Summer 1939, in this letter Larkin is continuing to perform sophistication by continuing to discuss literature with his father. Arguably, this could be, as Hermione Lee suggested, a case of Larkin behaving differently for different people (Lee, 2015, p. 20) – as we all do – but Larkin's joint correspondence to his parents as well as letters sent to 'Mop' and 'Pop' individually exhibit rigid role-playing. Larkin writes to his mother after hearing about reported attacks on Coventry:

> Dear Mop,
>
> Received letter from Pop this morning telling me of the dispersal and near-fall of the House of Penvorn. I am very sorry to hear it, indeed. I was becoming rather worried because Roe, who receives daily letters, told me of virulent attacks on the station &c. and on our district in general. How we are dispersed – Leicester, Linchfield, Coventry & Oxford! Gloomy thought. […]
>
> Am settling down now, except for work, which is very hard to get down to. Spend most of my time at lectures, eating, sleeping, & vainly trying to write poetry […]
>
> I haven't found many friends up here yet. The person (Iles) I know the best I simply loathe. Everybody else seems pleasant & unintelligent or distant & unintelligent. Oxford seems very little more intelligent than Coventry, in fact.
>
> I take a bath now on (generally) alternate mornings, and it is quite comforting. My battels last week came to about 4/6: this seemed a lot, but I heard somebody languidly complaining that his battels were 35/- & that he would have to cut down on his laundry! All else was on beer, wine &c. There are some mugs here. (Larkin to Eva, 26 October 1940, Booth, 2018, p. 17)

The letter opens with an emotional Larkin who feels upset about the attack and the fact that their family are living in different places at this time. With regards to his work and writing, Larkin presents himself as struggling to produce any writing. Moreover, his letter presents a feeling of isolation during his time at Oxford, socialising with minimal people and showing a disdain for those around him. He then proceeds to tell Eva about his bathing routine and discusses domestic bills such as laundry. Two days later, however, he writes to his father, and this letter presents a very different version of Larkin:

> Dear Pop,
>
> Your letter of Thursday reached me this morning with its calamities. Actually, I was beginning to get worried about you, for Roe, who receives letters every day, reported concentrated attacks on Coventry and particularly the station. If nothing had come this morning, I should have sent a telegram: "is no news good news?" in desperation. But now the news has come it is sufficiently horrible.
>
> What is happening in the world at present? I never read the papers and am quite ignorant of any developments at home or abroad. And I hope your temporary displacement won't mean abandonment of your war diary. That will probably be the only good thing resultant from the war at all. […]
>
> I have joined the English Club, the largest mix in Oxford, for 3/6 per term. Wilson Knight spoke on "Hassan" (James Elroy Flecker) on the first night to an enormous audience – nearly 300, I should think – at St. Hilda's. I have also subscribed for one term to "The Cherwell" (University magazine) which invites articles, short stories & poems. Four poems, too, have been sent to "New Verse". (Larkin to Sydney, 28 October 1940, p. 18).

The tone and phrasing at the beginning of this letter is almost identical to the one written to his mother. However, Larkin then proceeds to question his father about world affairs rather than the expense of laundry. Moreover, in his letter to Eva Larkin evokes a sense of uneasiness at the thought of how spread out his family are across the English Midlands. However, with Sydney, the mention of his 'displacement' is only to ensure that his father's literary 'war diary' will survive. Firstly, this emphasises the importance of writing and literature in the Larkin-Sydney correspondence. Furthermore, this is reinforced by Larkin telling his father about his joining the English Club – 'the largest mix in Oxford' – which presents Larkin as very social as opposed to the introvert we find in his letters to Eva. Moreover, he discloses to Sydney that

he has submitted ‘four poems’, whereas to Eva, he is trying ‘vainly’ to write poetry and does not mention any finished pieces. In his introduction to *Letters Home*, Booth observes the difference between Larkin’s letters to his mother and father and notes that it is as though a ‘gender theorist’ wrote them placing them in the categories of ‘masculine self-command’ and ‘feminine domesticity’ (p. xxiii). Whilst the above two letters do validate Booth’s argument, given Larkin’s domestic references in his letter to ‘Mop’ and the self-conscious control over his emotions he displays to ‘Pop’, they also display something more significant - which may be why Booth presented the letters to Eva as Larkin’s most ‘intimate’. Larkin’s letter to Eva gives the impression that she is his confidant: he can tell her that he does not have many friends; struggles to fit in; has been having difficulty settling into Oxford; and is feeling distant from his family. Whilst we might feel inclined to read these as emotional outpourings of Larkin’s insecurities, we must remember that both writer and reader play an essential role in letter writing - to paraphrase Nigel Barton and David Hall (Hall, 2000, p. 7). By this I mean that we cannot draw on the evidence of seemingly more emotive and intimate letters from the ‘writer’ without also considering the intended ‘reader’ of these letters. Larkin may well have been more honest with Eva regarding friendship and writing, but, equally, he may also have been exaggerating a sense of isolation and inadequacy to appeal to her as his reader. In the same sense, Larkin may have employed a distant, matter of fact tone in his letters to his father knowing that this particular style would appeal more to him.

Jonathan Ellis argues that ‘letter writers clearly try to accommodate the recipient […] matching style and yarn to the other person’s tastes’ (Ellis, 2001, p. 187). Whilst Larkin matches the expectations of Sydney, Eva and Kitty, his letters to Sydney are arguably the most revealing in showing how Larkin also tried to emulate the style of his father. Larkin primarily discussed literature with his father, but their correspondence also demonstrates that Larkin wanted to appear as an intellectual equal to his father – both in literature and in letter writing:

> The calendar arrived at lunch time today: thank you! Am glad you found my letter "most interesting": I'm afraid they must be very disconnected & hard to follow. Sorry I called you "S. Larkin" – I could have sworn I put "Esqu." in. Anyway, I've half a mind to address this to the "Lord High City Keeper of y^{e} Moneybags" just to nark you. (15 October 1940, Booth, 2018, p. 15)

This letter opens – as many of Larkin's letters do – with an acknowledgement of how his recipient responded to his previous letter. He then apologises for his incorrect use of his father's title. He ends the paragraph with a joke which suggests that perhaps he did not take his father's comments about the use of his title as seriously as we initially think. However, Larkin's letters to his father continue to demonstrate an epistolary self-awareness that suggests he does not like to make mistakes in the etiquette of letter-writing. Moreover, in his correspondence with Sydney, Larkin demonstrates an awareness of his recipient's own epistolary style:

> You know, reading your letters through, I am coming to the conclusion that you have a powerful style! You sound utterly detached, cold, impersonal: as if you were writing in an old farmhouse on a windy and stone littered moor, far from any human noise or movement. Only the wind answers your sentences: "I find that the days go rapidly by and I have not answered your last letter"; "I am sorry you have a cold and can offer no remedy"; "You are none the worse for knowing nothing about the war. We don't either"; "It is usual to put Mr. or even "Esq." in case of public officials". Then you fold the parchment, seal it with the old heirloom of a seal, and put it for the carrier to take when he calls in two days' time. Then you sink into your austere, wooden chair by the fire and listen to the wind around the high chimney pots or watch the racing clouds through the tall windows. (Larkin to Sydney, 12 November 1940, p. 24)

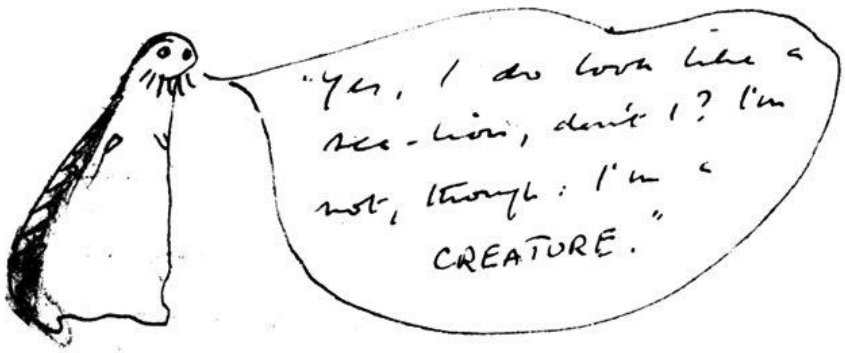
Larkin notes the 'detached' and 'cold' style of his father's letter writing. By the end of this outpour of seeming admiration for his father's epistolary talent, Larkin creates his own description and within that he is once again imagining his recipient (as he does with the women in his life as we explored in Parts I and II). This inclusion of literary description and clear attentiveness to how he and his father present themselves in letters demonstrates that Larkin's letters to his father cannot be read as solely biographical but once again as a mixture of truth and fiction.

In the 1940s, when Larkin began writing letters and writing home, it is clear that he used the letter as almost a substitute for prose writing in that he adapted personae and style

depending on whom he was writing to. Even if all three of his family members were going to read one letter, Larkin still conformed to his selected persona for each particular reader. By doing so, *Letters Home* do reveal biographical insights about Larkin's relationships with his family, but they also leave the letters standing midway between fact and fiction. Once again, we can identify that Larkin used the letter as a door to step in and out of reality whenever he needed to. This is particularly prevalent in the letters to Eva, to which we will now turn, where Larkin used the caricature of the Creature to live between those two worlds.

'I'm a CREATURE'

In his introduction to *Letters Home*, Booth explores the role of the affectionate and domesticated persona that Larkin played in his letters for Eva. Though he depicts them as an adaption of style, he still considers them to be more revealing of Larkin's inner-self than any other of Larkin's correspondence. Moreover, he considers this a mimicking of his mother's style, arguing that 'the degree to which Philip adopted Eva's attitude is startling' (p, xxiii). When writing to his parents, Larkin draws an image that looks like a sea-lion. However, he asserts to his parents that although he does look like sea-lion, he is not, he is a 'CREATURE' (Larkin to Sydney and Eva, 6 June 1943, p.77):



(p.77)

After this, Larkin's letters often feature illustrations of this caricature whilst his signatory remains at 'Philip' and his parents remain 'Mop' and 'Pop'. However, after his father's death, Larkin begins to adapt and interchange how he addresses Eva: 'My dear old Mop' (26

November 1950, p.176), ‘old Moth’ (7 January 1951, p.178), ‘Mop-Monst-Haugh’ (29 April 1951, p.186), ‘creaturely one’ (15 May 1951, p.186). Not only does he begin changing her name in the letters, he also starts to draw her as a character within his letters:

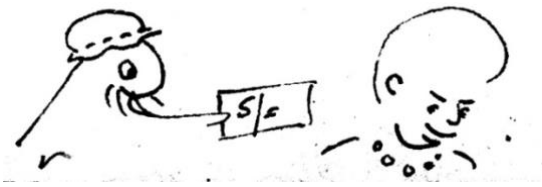
 (Larkin to Eva, 10 June 1951, p.189)

Eventually, Larkin abandoned his various names for Eva and settled for ‘Dear old Creature’ and ‘My very dear old Creature’ (p. xxxiii), and he kept the image of a female creature (as in the image above) in all of their correspondence. Although Booth acknowledges the core role these illustrations and names had to play in their correspondence, he avers that it exemplifies the intimacy between a mother and son. However, I would argue that although these images are intimate, they also reveal Larkin and Eva’s correspondence to be one that inhabits fictional worlds. The illustrations are the epitome of the personae that Larkin sought to construct with each of his correspondents.

In his letters to Eva, Larkin draws on the caricature of the creature as something that is distinct from people – different from the real world: ‘So Creature Castle is ours![6] Well, good luck to it, & to all the creatures and persons who inhabit it. I think the world can be divided into "Creatures" and "Persons", don't you? (Larkin to Eva, 23 September 1951, p. 194). For Larkin, the use of the Creature allowed him to step away from reality and live in a world he created for his mother. His illustrations, moreover, emphasise that this fictional world was located alongside, but was distant from, the real world:

> Many thanks for the letter! A more gruntled creature now.
> Are you trying 1500m. for Mrs D – *Long* wave?
> Will write at weekend as usual. […]

[6] This is the house that Eva would move into and live until 1972.



(Postcard. Larkin to Eva, 16 August 1951, p. 193)

In this postcard, Eva is distinguished as a Creature with a mob cap, whereas 'Mrs D'[7] is sketched as a person. When Larkin sketches himself as creature in social situations, he distinguishes himself from other people as well:

> What! A whole letter & no creatures. Well, let me see.
>
> 
>
>
> (Larkin to Eva, 16 March 1952, p. 202)

Not only is Larkin emphasising that his and his mother's world is different from the real world; when he illustrates their actions by sketching his – or indeed her own – actions (at the time of writing this letter, he was in Dublin), he is bringing his own caricatures to life. By this I mean that by including his sketches, it allows his readers to visualise where he is (as Creature, not Larkin). As we explored in Parts I and II, Larkin continuously attempted to visualise his reader, create a scene for his recipient, or indeed create a setting for himself to allow his reader to visualise him. Here, in the letters to his mother, he is once again visualising his reader – in this case Eva as Old Creature going to deliver a letter – or allowing Eva to visualise him – as a creature beside an Irishman in Dublin. In his letters to Eva, Larkin is always drawing himself and Eva, either trying to visualise what she has said, or creating a scene for when they will next see one another:

[7] 'Mrs Dale's Diary' was a popular BBC radio serial drama, broadcast daily between 1948 and 1967 (Booth, 2018, p. 193)

> So we shall be alone for Xmas after all? How jolly. We'll mull some wine & eat nuts. I'm sorry my cards don't reach you on time: they're surely postmarked Friday? Perhaps the post-creatures read them & decide they aren't important. But they *are,* post-creatures. (28 November 1952, p.214)

The excitement that Larkin presents to Eva suggests a closeness and affection in their relationship – which is reinforced in the sketch. Moreover, the humour when he is talking to the 'post-creatures' further reinforces an intimacy between them and their dedication to this creature world. However, this intimacy was part of their roleplaying in their epistolary world. Therefore, by addressing the postmen as 'post-creatures', Larkin is keeping them both separate from reality.

In his letters to Eva, Larkin continues to refer to himself as 'Creature': 'Later. – Yes, all over now: a creature filled with steak & potatoes, positively *gorged*. I'll certainly try your way of roasting things: I think perhaps I overcook my pieces of meat. – Not this one though' (Larkin to Eva, 19 October 1952, p. 211); 'creature alone in Dublin! Creature feels a bit lost. There is a mild sun coming out, but I can hear the wind, & I don't feel that rain is far away. I wonder what kind of a day you are having, & whether anything is sprouting in your back garden' (21 February 1954, p. 232). Rebecca Earle argues that, 'personal or familiar letters have long been viewed, along with diaries and other forms of autobiographical writing, as a means of self-expression' (Earle, 1999, p. 2). As we have explored, Booth reads these letters to Eva as expressing Larkin's affection and love for his mother. However, in these same letters, Larkin

has constructed a fictional version of himself as 'Creature', and this thereby undermines, or at the very least questions, the authenticity of his letters to Eva.

In his study on performativity, James Loxley acknowledges the distinction between acting and reality: 'In the theatre, one can say, 'this is just an act', and de-realize the act, by making acting into something quite distinct from what is real' (Loxley, 2007, p. 142). However, in the case of Larkin's letters to Eva, it is the Creature that acts as the stage or playing space that enables Larkin to perform fiction and distinguish his epistolary world from reality. By creating this caricature, Larkin is 'de-realizing' the 'I' that is himself and presenting a version – Creature – that takes his letters into a world that is 'quite distinct' from the real world. Larkin is indeed performing the role of the Creature when writing home, and Eva takes this version of Larkin very seriously as she replies calling him Creature and herself Old Creature. Erving Goffman, who studies how we present ourselves to others, interestingly notes how the role of the observer – or in this case the recipient – has to play in enabling our performance to become 'true':

> When an individual plays a part, he implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them. They are asked to believe that the character they see actually possesses the attributes he appears to possess, that the task he performs will have the consequences that are implicitly claimed for it, and that, in general, matters are what they appear to be. (Goffman, 1969, p. 28)

In the case of their letters to one another, Eva clearly took 'seriously' the role that Larkin was playing for her – the affectionate Creature – and adapted herself to suit the epistolary relationship: 'I do wish I was a better and braver creature', she writes to Larkin (Booth, 2018, Eva to Larkin, 26 February 1952 p. 201). However, despite the fact that they referred to themselves as third person creatures, it is interesting that Booth chose to consider these constructs as revealing of the intimacy of their relationship rather than revealing of Larkin's ability to perform in his letters. Booth does acknowledge that Larkin interchanged his persona to suit his mother, father and Kitty, but he fails to recognise the significance of the Creature in taking Larkin and Eva outside of reality and into an epistolary world or their own imagination.

In his correspondence with Kitty, Larkin created literary descriptions to describe his life in Oxford. However, in letters to Eva, Larkin wrote descriptions for the creatures:

> My dear Mop-Creature,
>
> Once again I have crawled into Queen's & spent the best part of an hour snoozing in the sun. For once again the day is fine, expansively fine, deliciously fine, splendidly fine. It is queer how a fine day always makes me think of the past – of wide brimmed garden party hats in the '90s & clusters of afternoons falling like drops of river water from an oar way back in the '70s & '60s – boating parties of curates and daughters and young men down for the Long Vacation, with straw hats and picnic baskets and fringed parasols. And in the early morning my thoughts go back much further – to mornings in the middle ages, when monks might be shuffling past a *ray* of sunshine on the stone floor in the mist of the early hours, with the "dawn chorus" of birds starting outside. I am wasting much space to no very good purpose, but fine weather does always send me beyond the confines of this particular day & place.

(Larkin to Eva, 18 May 1952, p. 203)

Larkin's use of the epistrophe 'fine', the similes, metaphors and adjectives are all literary devices employed to depict a beautiful image of a place he tells Eva that he longs to be in. Moreover, he sketches this place and interestingly he includes Eva's caricature of Old Creature in the illustration as well as himself. In this letter, Larkin is taking his and Eva's fictional world to another time and place and allowing her to visualise it. His focus on past time – the 1880s – is further evidence that Larkin is constructing another world – the 'foreign country' of the past – in his letters. Larkin longs to be removed from reality and life into a world where he and his recipient can live more comfortably – and more intimately – than they do in reality. As well as

creating literary descriptions for the Creatures, Larkin crafts poems that feature his Creaturely caricatures:

> I hope you are managing to keep up your afternoon rests, and have been able to put into operation the routine for shutting up the scullery: *one*, off with the main gas tap, *two*, lock the scullery door. Then it's all over. No need to worry any more.
>
> Turn the gas tap half round,
> Then creature can sleep sound;
> Plugs that are lying on the floor
> Needn't trouble creature more;
> Shut the door, put out the light,
> Happy creature sleeps all night.
>
> – and I do hope it will. Don't worry. You are no madder than the rest of us, and much nicer! (Larkin to Eva, 12 May 1955, p. 247).

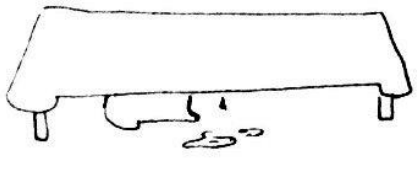
The poem demonstrates a caring and devoted son who wants to ensure that his mother is safe at night and to put her at ease. However, it would appear that his persona of the affectionate and dedicated son was easier maintained in their letters than in reality.

Similar to his correspondence with Jones, Larkin's letters to Eva demonstrate a struggle to leave their epistolary fictional world and behave in a similar way in the real world:

> I must thank you once more for my stay – everything was so nice, except for the *incident* pictured in Fig one! However, I hope the second figure is also true. […] All love to old C. from young C.

(Larkin to Eva, 23 May 1952, p. 204)

This letter demonstrates that Larkin struggled to maintain the persona of the affectionate son when he is in the physical presence of his mother. However, within the letter, he illustrates a sketch of how he wishes it could be. This 'second figure' echoes the dynamic that we find over and over again in his letters to Eva and which he does not appear to be able to match in the real world:

> My very dearest Old Creature,
>
> What a silly "performance" I made before I left. I do feel ashamed of myself. You w[d] hardly credit how miserable I feel at the time, though – like a limpet in process of being torn off a rock – that might explain in some measure my behaviour, though not excuse it. *Of course* I shall always visit you for the delight of seeing *you* and hearing of your doings: I was sorry we could not go out together yesterday, but I felt you w[d] benefit more from a rest after lunch, as I think you did. […]
>
> I feel *bitterly ashamed* of leaving my breakfast – if it were here I w[d] eat it 10 times over. It is just that *at the time* I get into such a state I cannot eat or think clearly or behave properly. Really, it is *not* easy to leave home with equanimity when I know what I am coming back to, not that it's very terrible I suppose. You were goldenly good to me and I am *very* grateful – but I am now retreating under the table where I shall stay till I hear from you.
>
> 
>
>
> (Larkin to Eva, 17 October 1955, pp. 254 - 255)

Larkin is profusely apologising in this letter for how he behaved towards his mother during their last encounter. Interestingly, he labels his conduct in the real world a 'performance', thereby suggesting that the persona he is presenting in the letter is *not* a performance. However, his inability to live up to this version in the flesh only reinforces that Larkin was presenting an exaggerated and theatrical version of the affectionate son in his letters to Eva.

Although Larkin did not want to live with his mother, communicating with her regularly was of extreme importance. The cultivated creatures allowed him to maintain a physical distance from his mother, but at the same time present a closeness between them – which suited the needs of his reader, Eva. Larkin evidently preferred their epistolary relationship and found

it easier to communicate with his mother and present himself as the dutiful and caring son that he evidently felt she needed – a persona he would not have been able to perform so well had he continued to live with her. Therefore, inclusion of the Creature is of significant importance to Larkin when writing home as he needed to live in the fictitious world rather than face reality. This is why the sketches featured in Larkin's letters right up until Eva's death in 1977. In 1972, when her health was in decline and Larkin was writing more to Eva than she was replying to him, he still included the sketches:

> Today is Ash Wednesday, the start of Lent, isn't it? I don't suppose you have had any pancakes. I didn't. Do you remember how you used to make them at Coventry?
>
> 
>
> (Larkin to Eva, 16 February 1972, p. 497)

The illustrations remained at the core of their epistolary relationship, allowing Larkin to mediate the reality of his mother's deteriorating health and continue to live in the world he had constructed for them. Once again, like our main character, Marie, in *Michaelmas Term at St Brides,* Larkin would rather keep in the story as the Creature than he would return to the reality of being Larkin himself.

The creation of the Creature is the door that Larkin used to live in between two worlds. The first world is the real one: it consisted of Larkin writing to his mother every week, sharing details of his every day, asking after her health and complaining about his own. The second world is the fictional one: the one where Larkin was able to create a caricature of himself that allowed him to present a version of himself that was different to reality. It allowed him to maintain the fiction of the tender and emotional son that his mother Eva needed whilst maintaining a space between them. The illustrations included with the letters display an

intimacy, but they also demonstrate a distance; they show us elements of the relationship between Larkin and Eva, but they also force us to consider those aspects of their relationship as fictitious rather than biographical – thereby complicating our perception of Larkin.

The illustrations found in *Letters Home* were also present in Larkin's letters to Jones and to the other women in his life. However, Larkin's illustrations are constructed differently for different readers – in Part II, which discuss Jones' depiction as Rabbit. The next section will explore how Larkin's construction of caricatures similar to the Creature started with his correspondence with his mother but stemmed beyond their epistolary relationship and was employed when Larkin was writing to other women in his life. Moreover, it will also explore the influence that Beatrix Potter had over the drawings and the inclusion of these animalistic sketches that dominate Larkin's letters more than we ever realised before.

The Tale of the Creature

(Larkin to Eva, 24 October 1952, Booth, 2018, p. 212)

In the introduction to *Letters Home*, Booth explores how important the routine of writing and receiving letters from Eva was to Larkin. He observes that 'from the beginning the routine was fixed […] a missed letter [from Eva] would cause a minor crisis and generate displays of affection' (Booth, 2018, p. xxxiii). However, it was not just their routine that was fixed. Their roles as young Creature and old Creature were established in the early 1950s and remained identical until Eva's death in 1977. As did the style of their letters. This above postcard, sent to Eva after Larkin did not receive a letter from his mother, demonstrates not only his concern but also their methods of communicating with one another. Here, the illustrations themselves dominate the letter rather than the text itself. The sketch of the Creature searching for the letter allows his reader to imagine their feelings and actions when they did not receive

a letter from the other – rather than using words – thereby inviting readers to enter into their fictional world. Moreover, Larkin brings Eva into this fictional world by illustrating Old Creature lying in a bed unwell. The illustrations allow the characters – Larkin and Eva as Creature and Old Creature – to come to life and live within the fictional worlds constructed by the writer. However, Larkin is not the first author to use his letters as a platform for creating stories.

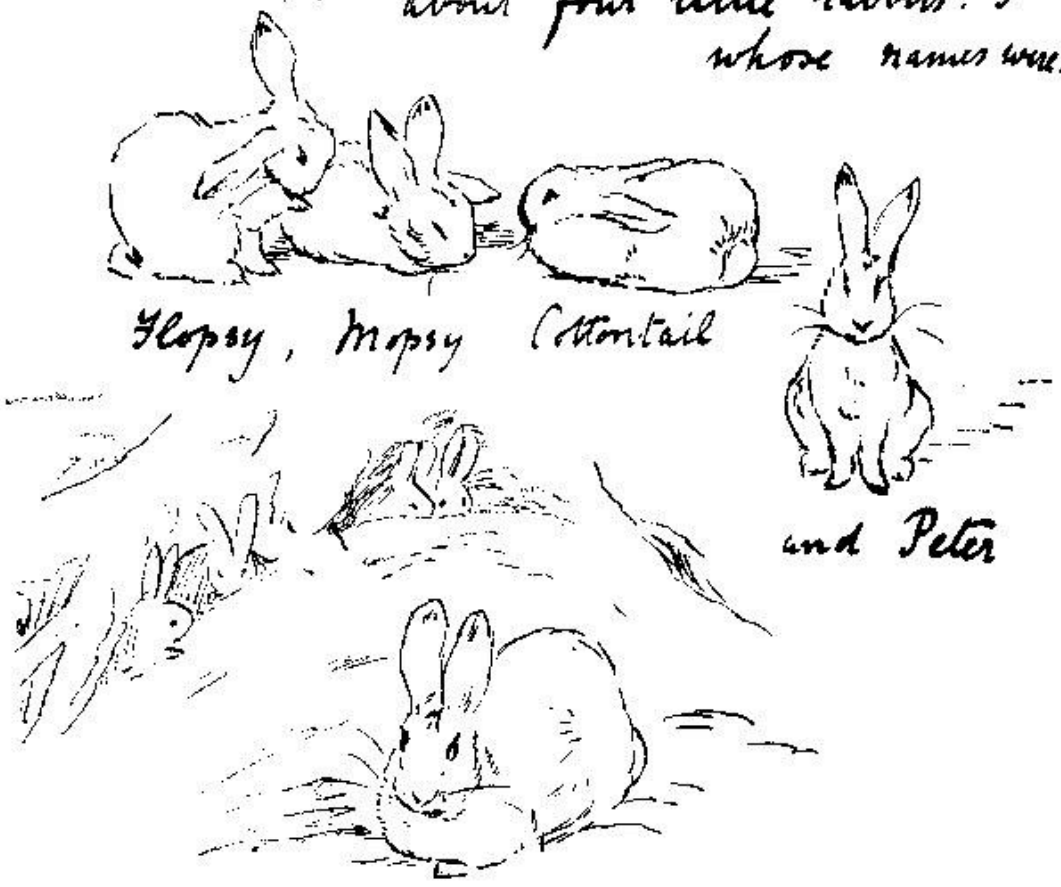
In *The Tale of Beatrix Potter: A Biography* (1946), Margaret Lane recounts how the stories of Peter Rabbit began. Up until the age of twenty-six, as far as her biographer was concerned, Beatrix Potter had lived an ordinary life. However, this perception of ordinariness changed after Lane uncovered a seemingly insignificant 'grubby envelope'. This envelope held 'fifty or sixty illustrated letters' (Lane, 1946, p. 49). Lane remarks that 'they are quite unlike the letters which people usually keep, being not in the least like the letters that are usually written. They are written to children' (p. 52). Writing to Noel Moore, the eldest son of Beatrix Potter's former governess Anne Carter, Potter invents a story to comfort him while he is poorly. The letter reads:

> My dear Noel,
> I don't know what to write to you, so I shall tell you a story about four little rabbits whose names were Flopsy, Mopsy, Cottontail and Peter.
> They lived with their mother in a sand bank under the root of a big fir tree. (p. 55)

These words are immediately identifiable as the opening to the famous tale which is still read to this day: *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* (1901). Potter's personal letter - written to a young child - has now turned out to be one of the most adored children's stories of all time. Rather than drawing on letters for insight into a writer's personal life, Lane approaches this letter of Potter's as a window onto her literary life. Not only are the words identical to the ones found in the published pieces, but in her letter to Noel, Potter included some penned sketches that are also found in the printed books:

Eastwood Dunkeld
Sep 2nd 93

My dear Noel,
I don't know what to write to you, so I shall tell you a story about four little rabbits.
whose names were—



Flopsy, Mopsy Cottontail

and Peter

They lived with their mother in a sand bank under the root of a big fir tree.

(McDowell, 2018)

Lane writes that Potter's 'letters are illustrated with little pen and ink drawings, spontaneous pictures which flow on the page as naturally as words.' Littered with rabbits, mice, squirrels, jackdaws, dogs, Lane tells us that the letters on occasion contain 'Miss Potter herself with umbrella or camera, strolling on the beach, gathering mushrooms, looking at pigs'. Lane continues, the letters are 'by no means the serious naturalist at work, but the imagination which could picture the sandy recesses of a rabbit hole as furnished with little chairs and tables, and maintain that dried lavender was really rabbit tobacco' (Lane, 1946, p. 57). The drawings add to the story telling of Potter's letter, and firmly place her personal correspondence outside the realms of biographical simplicity. The precision Potter has clearly taken in sketching these four rabbits illuminates to us that the illustrations are not only of equal importance to the text of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* but are the very basis of it. In Larkin's letters to Eva, too, Larkin's pictures of the Creatures are the very foundation for Larkin and Eva' co-existence in Larkin's fictionalised world.

In Potter's published stories, the images have maintained their importance. For Margaret Mackey, 'the small watercolours which also tell the story of Peter Rabbit are as distinctive as the prose' (Mackey, 2002, p. 92). Moreover, for Mackey, Potter's illustration displayed a careful precision when drawing the animals in their own right: 'While the stories reflect her acuity about human foibles, her pictures are famous for their care with which she portrays recognisable animal demeanour, despite the clothes and the upright postures' (p. 92). The pictures enrich our experience when imagining the characters of the story, leaving the text as a guide to the picture story rather than the other way around – just as Larkin's illustrations in his letters to Eva do. Potter's sketches, with their meticulousness, and their character (such as the upright postures, or the clothing that is seen later on in the letter), helps explain why they came to be published illustrations. They tell a story of their own. For Carole Scott, 'narratologists have made many attempts to grapple with the viewpoints from which a story is

told', ranging from first person to third person. She continues, 'the complexity of narrative perspective is multiplied in picture-books, for pictures present characters and events in different ways and with different techniques from verbal texts, providing additional or alternative perspectives that add dimension to the reader's experience' (Scott, 2009, p. 101). The pictures in Potter's letters and tales allow the reader to further enter the imaginative world and experience the story in a way that language cannot. The pictures of the characters help the reader to identify with them, and overall to enjoy a more intimate experience; it adds a dimension of character that you cannot get from the written text. It's an imaginative world that the author and the reader enter together, visualising the same settings and characters constructed by the writer – Noel entering Potter's imaginative world and Eva entering Larkin's fictionalised sphere.

It would be impossible to assert that Larkin's drawings were solely influenced by Potter's letter to Noel. In fact, we cannot confirm that Larkin did indeed read her letter. However, what we can establish is that Larkin was a prolific letter writer and an avid illustrator in his letters and that he demonstrated a clear awareness of the role that sketches can play in alternating and adapting a reader's views. Moreover, the illustrations that he includes do dominate – or certainly have equal weighting to – the text in his letters. Furthermore, whilst we cannot firmly conclude that Larkin had read Potter's letters, what we can confirm is Larkin's admiration for Potter's work – a considerable interest that has been underexplored until now.

In Larkin's own criticism of writers, he demonstrates an admiration for, or an interest in, the works of Thomas Hardy, D.H. Lawrence, Wilfred Owen and Evelyn Waugh – to name a few (Larkin, 1982). In his letters, too, we can uncover further evidence of his opinions on these writers. For example, in *Selected Letters*, Lawrence (the author alone – not counting the works) is cited forty times in the index, Hardy is cited on twenty-two occasions, Waugh nine

times and Owen four. However, the significant influence of the Edwardian children's author, Beatrix Potter, is only mentioned twice – one of which is a footnote – and Larkin did not write any critical essays about her work. However, Larkin regularly discussed the works of Potter with his female correspondents – particularly his mother Eva and Jones – but these letters about Potter (with the exception of two) were omitted from Thwaite's first edition of letters. Moreover, in Motion's biography, her name is not mentioned at all – despite the fact that Larkin visited the home of Potter with Monica Jones (which will be explored further in this section) and her that name features regularly in his letters to Jones and to other women in his life.

In Thwaite's second edition, *Letters to Monica*, he makes a fleeting allusion, for the first time, to Larkin's admiration for Potter in his introduction, albeit only briefly:

> The two of them [Larkin and Jones] shared a sympathy with animals, in the sense that both of them deplored bullfights, vivisection, myxomatosis and pet-shops, and they were much taken not only with Beatrix Potter's inventions (and even with those of some of her imitators and followers) but with real creatures, in particular cats and rabbits. (Thwaite, 2011, p. xi)

Thwaite's observations here are interesting. He recognises their shared interests with animals yet makes no reference to Larkin's poetry on the subject – 'At Grass', 'Take One Home for the Kiddies', 'Myxomatosis', 'First Sight', 'Laboratory Monkeys', 'Pigeons', 'The Mower' – and he does not consider that the majority of animals discussed in their letters are field animals similar to Potter's creations. More importantly, and certainly more significant to this thesis, is the fact that although Thwaite briefly acknowledges Larkin's fondness for Potter's inventions, he overlooks entirely Potter's influence over Larkin's 'creature' and indeed over the cats and rabbits that Larkin included in his letters to women. In fact, Potter's name features a mere seven times in total in *Letters to Monica*, leaving her influence underplayed.

It is not until we read Booth's biography, *Philip Larkin: Life, Art and Love,* that we begin to recognise the impact that Potter may have had on Larkin and the influence she had over the works – or rather the letters – that he created:

> From May 1951 onwards, imagery of rabbits becomes a recurrent feature of their [Larkin and Jones'] correspondence. Letters begin 'Forepaws', 'Ears' or 'Bun' (Bunny-rabbit) in reference to their shared delight in the stories of Beatrix Potter. He adorns his letters with charming sketches of a rabbit in a skirt […] he depicts himself as a rather shapeless seal, in a schoolboy pun on 'sealed with wax' or 'sealed with affection' which goes back to his earliest family letters. His engaging self-dramatizations and generous concern for Monica's well-being create a secure shared world. (Booth, 2014, p. 165)

Indeed, Booth acknowledges Potter's influence over Larkin's sketches in his letters to Jones. For him, Larkin's rationale for illustrating Rabbit and Seal is because of his and Jones' shared admiration for the Potter tales and for the writer herself. However, it is not only in the letters he writes to Jones that we can find these sketches, and their inclusion is not solely about Larkin's love for Potter's writing. Rather, the inclusion of the sketches allows Larkin to step out of reality and into a 'secure shared world' but this is an epistolary world he inhabits with all of the women in his life. Booth observes that Larkin's signatory, 'sealed with affection', stems back to the early letters home. However, I would argue that it is not just Larkin's 'sealed with affection' signatures that stem back to these early letters – so too do the inclusion of sketches illustrating the text, and it is on these sketches that Potter's influence can be chiefly discerned. In fact, it is not until we read *Letters Home* and consider the illustrations that Booth included – this being the first edition to include copious drawings – that we can truly appreciate the immensity of Potter's influence on Larkin's letter writing. Although Booth informs us in *Letters Home* that the Creature was influenced by his Oxford friend Diana Gollancz (Booth, 2018, p. xxiv), it was in name only. The illustrations, and indeed the language and storytelling, that is prevalent in Larkin's letters to Eva casts a significant new insight into how we should read Larkin's letters. His construction of these

'animal caricatures' throughout his letters to women echo the fictional worlds that Potter created and remind us that in Larkin's letters we hear, not the life of Larkin, but rather the tale of Larkin's Creature.

The first time we can identify Larkin's awareness of Potter's works is in a letter written to his friend Judy Egerton: 'Actually I didn't go. Worn to ravelling, like the *T of G'* (Larkin to Egerton, 17 December 1958, Thwaite, 1992, p. 297). Evidently, this brief reference to the *Tailor of Gloucester* cannot in itself confirm Larkin's admiration for her work. In *Letters to Monica*, however, his veneration becomes more apparent: Larkin writes to Jones demonstrating his admiration for Potter: 'Have just been reading the orig. version of *Tailor of G* [Tailor of Gloucester] – just shows you how marvellous the later version is. Great tears roll down my face. A perfect work of art: I'd give all Proust – Joyce – Mann for it' (Larkin to Jones, 6 April 1970, Thwaite, 2011, p. 407). By the third edition of letters, *Letters Home*, references to Potter are plentiful: when writing to his mother, Larkin once again expresses a fondness for another tale of Potter's:

> I continue with the raw salad daily, as far as possible, like Timmy Willie in Beatrix Potter's *Johnny Town Mouse* – I feel a great deal of sympathy with him. Do you know the story? It's about a field mouse that gets taken to town accidentally in a basket, and town life doesn't agree with him. Then he gets back to the country, & the town mouse comes & visits him. There is a wonderful passage when the town mice ask what he *does* in the country, & he explains how he sits shelling nuts & peas, and smelling the violets after the rain – it nearly makes me cry. You will think I am silly. (Larkin to Eva, 24 February 1962, Booth, 2018, p. 250)

Reading through any edition of Larkin's letters, it is clear that literature remains an important, and highly prominent, subject throughout all of Larkin's correspondences. It ranges from books he is currently reading to recent reviews, novels suggested by friends, his own writing, and the classics. Interestingly, most of Larkin's literary discussions focus primarily on the author rather than on the writing itself. However, when it comes to the work of Potter, his comments reveal a stronger admiration for the stories rather than for the mindset and

motivations of the writer. The tone he adopts when discussing her stories resembles the tales themselves for he uses a childlike dialect, as if he and his reader are reverting to their own childhoods. His emotive expressions – 'sympathy', 'wonderful', 'makes me cry' – suggest a strong admiration for the story (a story of a mouse entering a world outside of their own) before expressing his feelings of identification with the mouse. This theme of stepping outside of your own world momentarily is something that we can recognise in many of Larkin's letters, particularly those that include illustrative sketches. Interestingly, he concludes his outpouring of awe for Johnny Town Mouse by wondering if his mother will think he is 'silly'. Yet , Larkin's letters to Eva contain many sketches and childlike conversations, leaving it surprising that he would feel the need to defend his fondness for the children's tale.

The *Tailor of Gloucester* and *Johnny Town Mouse* are not the only tales, or indeed Potter characters, that Larkin expressed an admiration for or an identification with. Stored in the Larkin archive at the Hull History Centre is a collection of ornaments relating to Potter's tales. It includes a Peter Rabbit running, a poorly Peter Rabbit (*The Tale of Peter Rabbit*), two of Mr Benjamin Bunny - one of which is wearing a hat - (*The Tale of Benjamin Bunny*), Mrs Flopsy Bunny (*The Tale of the Flopsy Bunnies*), Cecily Parsley (*Nursery Rhymes*), Tommy Brock (*The Tale of Mr Tod*), Duchess and two Ribby figurines (*The Pie and the Patty Pan*), Tabitha Twitchit and, unsurprisingly, Timmy Willie (*Johnny Townmouse*). Though these figurines lived on Larkin's mantelpiece, they bore no mention in Motion's biography *A Writer's Life*. They appear to have been somewhat overshadowed by his father's Hitler model – which Motion does draw our attention towards. Moreover, Larkin's admiration for Potter is vastly under-acknowledged in *Philip Larkin: Selected Letters.* Only on two occasions does Potter's name even feature among the pages of *Selected Letters*. Firstly, in the letter to Judy Egerton already quoted, Larkin refers to the '*T of G*', but had

Thwaite not footnoted it as Potter's *Tailor of Gloucester*, readers would probably have missed it. Secondly, Larkin makes reference to Potter in a letter to his publisher, Charles Monteith: 'I thought your house was extremely fascinating – almost something out of Beatrix Potter' (Larkin to Monteith, 5 June 1974, Thwaite, 1992, p. 508). Evidently, neither of these quotations suggests Larkin's strong regard for her work, and the letters which do suggest his strong appreciation for Potter's tales were left out of Thwaite and Motion's two 'ground-breaking' books published in the early 1990s. Hidden in the archive at the Bodleian, however, are several of Larkin's letters which highlight his esteem for the Edwardian children's author: Writing to Barbara Pym, Larkin asks, 'Why only keep a *black* kitten? Tabbies are nice. Mrs Ribby in B. Potter' (Larkin to Pym, 18 March 1979, MS. Pym 152 p.37). Even more significantly, he writes to Judy Egerton on his holidays in Sawrey: 'Greeting from the shrine of England's greatest writers' (Larkin to Egerton, n.d., MS.Eng, c. 7454 p.40). What is most peculiar about the exclusion of these letters from Thwaite's edition is the fact that letters to both Pym and Egerton do feature in *Selected Letters*; most notably, their letters often discuss literature – yet the letters with his comments about Potter are not included.

In his correspondence with Jones, we note their exchanging of books and mutual appreciation for the work of Beatrix Potter: 'very many thanks for the books, and much as I like J. Puddleduck it is the other that at present wins my heart' (Larkin to Jones, 28 November 1952, Thwaite, 2011, pp. 93-4). Writing to Jones the very next day, Larkin describes the tale that had his heart:

> The real hero of *J. Townmouse* charms me completely. He is quite my kind of person. I shall know what to say to Kingsley (or Bruce) now: 'Oh yes, yes, you have been most kind; but I do feel so ill.' His account of how he spends his time in the country is lovely, & I think his leaf-umbrella most sensible. O yes, yes: you have been most kind: this is the one for me. The picture of him carrying the grass cuttings! (Larkin to Jones, 29 November 1952, p.94)

For the second time, Larkin's 'favourite' character Timmy Willie from *Johnny Townmouse* features in his letters. One allusion we have already noted above, in Larkin's letter to his Mother ten years later; here, however, we can see where his original appreciation for the tale began. On both occasions, Larkin makes reference to this other world that Timmy Willie found himself in (the town) and expresses his own connection to this character. What is most peculiar about this letter is Larkin's comments about Amis and Montgomery. After reading the tale, Larkin tells Jones that he will adopt the language of Timmie Willie after staying with Amis: 'Oh yes, yes, you have been most kind'. Reflecting on Larkin's letters to Amis, it is unlikely that he would ever speak to his contemporary in this way. Rather, this persona of the Potter character feels set against Amis, as though it is an antidote to the rampant masculinity that defined Larkin's relationship with Amis. Moreover, this comment to Jones suggests that Larkin did not tell Amis the truth. This polite language – 'Oh yes, yes' – to cover up honest feelings echoes once again Larkin's poem 'Vers De Société'. The poem opens with the speaker reading a letter from a friend inviting him to their party: '*Perhaps / You'd care to join us?*' (Burnett, 2012, pp. 91, 2-3). The speaker responds to himself: 'In a pig's arse, friend' (3), but when he begins the letter, he adopts a more appropriate persona: '*Dear Warlock-Williams: I'm afraid-*' (6). After considering all the reasons for why the speaker does not want to go to his friend's party, he does not divulge these but instead replies in conciliatory tone, pleasing his friend: '*Dear Warlock-Williams: Why, of course-*' (36). This letter to Jones reminds us that the persona Larkin presented to Jones was not the same as he presented to Amis.

When Larkin explores the work of other writers there tends to be a balance between his likes and dislikes, but with the Potter tales he only writes with admiration. Moreover, as we explored earlier in the thesis on pp. 130-133, Larkin's primary focus when making literary references tends to be on the author and their biography. However, with Potter, his emphasis

falls on the characters of the Potter tales rather than on the writer. He considers Potter's anthropomorphising of the country mouse as though he is a human being, praising Timmy Willie's account of life in the countryside and approving his use of a 'leaf-umbrella'. In the same letter, Larkin's emotive account of his negative encounter with Patsy Strang demonstrates his identification and admiration for the Potter creatures as he defends himself against Strang's accusations:

> I had a sort of difference of opinion with P. Strang about the Potter books: she condemned them as 'anthropomorphist': further, she accused me of not liking animals at all, only Potter ones & ones on my mantelpiece. I was somewhat at a loss. I do sometimes feel ashamed of liking these sweet little bunnies, but the emotion is there & she touches it. I know that by 'animals' she means Twinkle, their stupid obstreperous sheepdog, & that in a sense it's true, but of course I've had no chance. I was never the intimate of cats like you! I never paid calls in the loft! 'Good afternoon Mistress Tabby! Yes I should love a cup! What a sweet kettle-holder! Mouse-skin, is it? Did you cure it yourself?' etc. etc. That was never my good fortune. Of course I'm not going to *stop* reading Potter, because I can't defend myself, & don't take my ability to do so very seriously anyway. (Larkin to Jones, 29 November 1952, p. 94)

Larkin's defence is not what we might expect. Larkin reverts to childlike dialect: he tells Jones that his affection lies with the 'sweet little bunnies' and the emotion the tales carry. Moreover, and echoing his imagined encounter with Amis in the same letter, Larkin is once again presenting to Jones a version of himself that he clearly did not show Strang. With the admission of his love for 'sweet little bunnies' and 'feeling ashamed', it could be read as Larkin being more open and intimate with Jones about how he truly feels. However, I would argue that it is more a case of Larkin indulging Jones in their shared world of 'sweet little bunnies'. By telling Jones this story and reacting in this way, Larkin is keeping them in this fictional world. Following his snide remarks towards Strang's dog, Larkin recreates a Potter tale within his letter to Jones: he tells a story reflecting *The Tale of the Pie and the Patty Pan.* The cat and dog dynamic in Larkin's 'tale' resembles the relationship between the characters of Duchess and Ribby in Potter's story. Further, the polite but insincere gesture towards the

'mouse-skin' kettle holder not only confirms Larkin's childlike response, but echoes the attitude of the character Duchess when she smells the mouse pie:

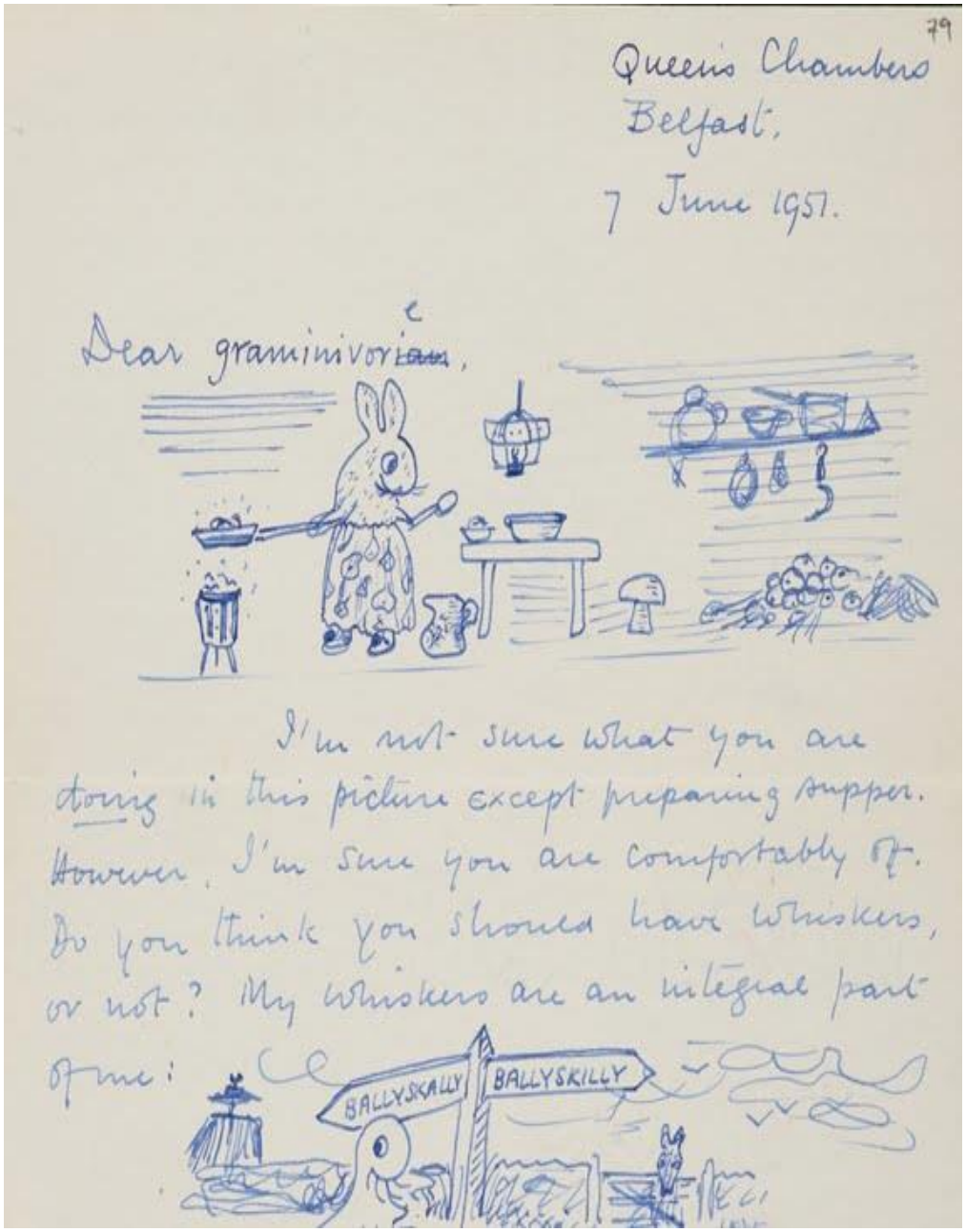
> "Come in! and how do you do? My dear Duchess,' cried Ribby. "I hope I see you well?" "Quite well, I thank you, and how do *you* do, my dear Ribby?" said Duchess. "I've brought you some flowers; what a delicious smell of pie!" "Oh, what lovely flowers! Yes, it is mouse and bacon!" (Potter, 2009, p. 30)

The disingenuous remarks from Duchess suggests that she is presenting a falsified version of herself to Ribby. In fact, both Duchess and Ribby are presenting versions of themselves that they believe the other will be more accepting of - a theme that is prevalent in the Potter tales, as it is in Larkin's letters.

In his biography, Booth acknowledges that Larkin presented his admiration for Potter and his affection for animals differently dependent on the recipient – . He notes that 'the contrast between Monica's and Patsy's personalities focused itself in terms of their attitudes towards animals' (Booth, 2014, p. 172). He compares the letter to Jones which we have just explored with one that was also written to Jones a year earlier after Larkin spotted a mouse creep out from behind the mantelpiece: 'not very nice! First time I've seen him. He *scuttled* back on realizing he wasn't alone […] this depresses me rather – Beatrix Potter's all very well in print but' (p.172). However, this letter expresses something far more significant than Larkin's admiration for Potter's tales; it reinforces Larkin's preference to remain – like Marie in *Michaelmas Term at St Brides* – in the stories rather than face reality itself. Just like the mice in the Potter tales, so too the caricatures that Larkin creates in his own 'tales' – are all very well in print but are less so in reality.

Omitted from *Selected Letters* was not only Larkin's many references to small animals and Beatrix Potter but his illustrations of the Creature and other animals. Illustrations adorned Larkin's letters – both in the text of his letters and in the marginalia – enriching the imaginative experience between writer and reader. Thwaite chooses not to include them in his

first edition of letters, and this ultimately leaves the reader missing out on that 'narrative complexity', as Scott notes in her study of illustrations. In *Selected Letters*, Thwaite did on occasion include '[drawing]' in the text, but this gives the reader no indication as to the context of the sketches; what they may have looked like, and contained, their detail, and indeed their purpose in any particular letter. As we know, these drawings do begin to feature in *Letters to Monica,* where Thwaite has included a small selection of Larkin's drawings of Jones as a rabbit, or indeed of himself as a creature, or Seal. However, Larkin sketched over almost every letter he wrote to women, so Thwaite's edition will inevitably not have given justice to their significance for the epistolary identities that Larkin constructs through his illustrations; his letter were saturated with sketches of animals - depicting both himself and his reader, demonstrating their fictionalised worlds:



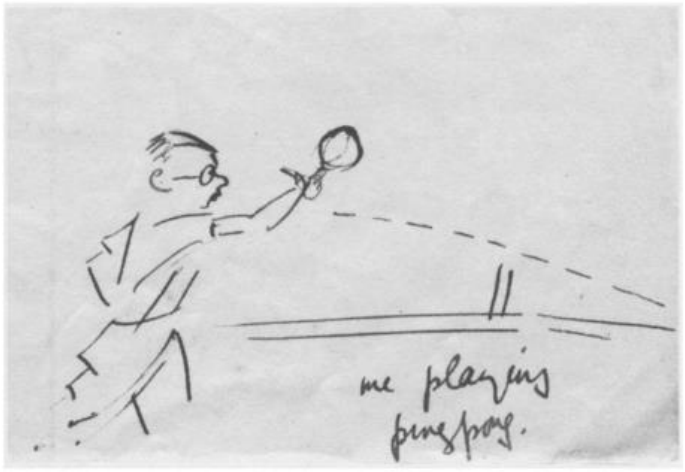
(Larkin to Jones, 7 June 1957, Bodleian, MS. Eng. c. 7403)

Larkin addresses Jones as 'Dear Graminivore' (cited on p. 150) and so is automatically drawing her into his fictional world by not calling her by her actual name. He then immediately illustrates the rabbit to match the title he has given her – a drawing that arguably resembles Old Mrs Bunny in *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*. The drawing itself is anthropomorphic– a rabbit, stood upright wearing clothes and placed in a kitchen cooking. However, taking the drawing and combining it with the title of 'Graminivore' – a herbivorous animal (like a rabbit) that feeds on grass – Larkin is zoomorphisising Jones. The drawing illustrates to the reader how Larkin visualises Jones: she becomes a character in the letter just as the rabbits in Potter's letter to Noel are characters in the story she constructs. Jones is no longer herself, but a character in Larkin's letters. The text in the letter itself, which is usually the primary focus of a letter, is now secondary. The drawing, like the Potter tales, overshadows the text and allows the reader to enter Larkin's imaginative world. By this I mean, had the letter simply read, 'are you preparing supper?' for example, and no drawing was included, our vision of Jones as a rabbit would not be as clear – nor would it have been for Jones. The drawing certainly has a playful dimension to it, contributing to the shared sense of intimacy noted between Larkin and Jones in Part II (see p. 156). However, the drawings shift Larkin's letters out of the biographical realm encouraging us to see them as creative pieces of work rather than as biographical windows onto his and Jones' private affairs.

The precision of the illustrated rabbit remarkably echoes Potter's technique in her original letter. Moreover, the domestic setting in which Larkin places his drawing of Jones is reflective of the female characters found in a Potter tale: Old Mrs Bunny going to the shop for bread in *A Tale of Peter Rabbit*; Hunca Munca cleaning the doll's house in *The Tale of Two Bad Mice;* Ribby baking the pie in *The Pie and the Patty Pan.* Moreover, if we look closely at the clothing in Larkin's drawing, we can identify that she is wearing a skirt and

shoes whilst cooking in the kitchen – an outfit she wore in most of Larkin's sketches. This theme does indeed echo the domesticity theme in the tales of Potter's. However, it also illuminates how Larkin views Jones through the narrative frame of the letter – she was no longer a University Lecturer, but a rabbit in the domestic home.

At the bottom of the letter, we can see Larkin's Creature – a role we know he plays in his letters to Jones and Eva. What is interesting is that it was Larkin who created the creature for himself, the old creature for his mother, and here with Jones, he has created the rabbit – the fictionalised worlds are constructed entirely by him. What is immediately striking when comparing Jones as Rabbit and Larkin as Creature is the clothing: Jones is dressed in feminine clothing identifying her as female, but Larkin is not wearing any clothes. If we did not know that Larkin intended the illustration to represent himself (which he confirms in the letter), it would be more difficult to identify the drawing as male or female. Moreover, the sketching of his own character is not placed in a stereotypical male or female setting in the way he places Jones. It is as though Larkin is applying the stereotypical gender role to Jones but not to himself. Moreover, by not gendering himself, Larkin is further removing the possibility of our interpreting the caricature of the Creature as a substitute for himself. Interestingly, when he writes to Sutton and Amis, Larkin includes drawings on a number of occasions. However, these images are immensely different to those illustrations included in his letters to female correspondents. More specifically, when he writes to men, he presents a sketch of a person – not a Creature – who is undoubtedly male:



This drawing comes from a letter to Jim Sutton, dated August 12, 1939, in which the seventeen-year-old Larkin describes playing ping-pong, while on holiday in Jersey, with a "silly little baldheaded fool." He writes, "I take great pleasure in whooping him."

(Harley and Orwin, 2008, p. 468)

This sketch to Sutton resembles the overtly masculine self-constructions that Larkin presents in his writing to Amis. However, as we have explored (pp. 77-90), Larkin appears to have been playing up to this male expectation with his hyperbolic language and indeed his own mockery of it. In order to keep up appearances with his male contemporaries, Larkin must give the impression of the confident male:

> Words, acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires, create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality. (Butler, 1990, p. 416)

Larkin may have felt obliged when writing to men to perform in line with the 'frame of reproductive heterosexuality' and to fit in with what he thought his male readers expected of him. It does leave us with a question, however. Why, then writing to the women in his life, was he an androgenous Creature rather than a male? Perhaps it was because Larkin used the Creature to escape his reality – to escape from the rampant masculinity he felt pressured into – and to live in a safer secure world where that did not matter. By not assigning a gender to the Creature, Larkin is leaving his fictional caricature up open interpretation by his readers.

By only including Larkin's illustrations in *Letters to Monica*, Thwaite denies his readership an opportunity to appreciate the role the drawings played in Larkin's letter writing as a whole. As we now know from the publication of *Letters Home*, Larkin's illustrations began when writing home, and they remained a consistent feature of his epistolary identity throughout his life. Moreover, the creation of the Creature which is echoed in his letters to Jones and to other women in his life was initially created when writing to his mother. Had *Letters Home* been released first, readers would have been better placed to identify the importance of these caricatures as fictionalised characters inhabiting Larkin's worlds rather than reading Larkin's letters as biographical. Moreover, his reputation may not have been left

as damaged by Thwaite's editions had we been able to identify Larkin's clear ability to manipulate personae through access to his illustrations of the Creature from the start. Furthermore, by recognising the importance of these sketches in presenting a fictionalised version of Larkin, we might have better appreciated how far the fictional worlds that he created for other women in his life stem from the creation of the Creature and from Beatrix Potter. That is not to say that Larkin treated women as a homogenous group. Rather, it was more a case that Larkin took his fictional creation which originated in his letters to Eva, adapted it, and created individual fictionalised caricatures and stories for the women he corresponded with.

'Alternatively, you can consider yourself a small furry animal'

As explored earlier in this section, Larkin created fictionalised settings for Kitty and Eva by writing literary passages of lyrical description or constructing imaginative worlds for his reader. Interestingly, however, Larkin also constructed fictionalised stories in his letters to women that were either based on his Creature, or on the animal that he chose to associate with his reader – generally a field animal echoing those found in Potter tales. Like Larkin's letters, Potter's letter to Noel included text to accompany the illustrations:

> My dear Noel,
> 'I don't know what to write to you, so I shall tell you a story about four little rabbits whose names were Flopsy, Mopsy, Cottontail and Peter.
> They lived with their mother in a sand bank under the root of a big fir tree.
> "Now, my dears," said old Mrs Bunny, "you may go into the field or down the lane, but don't go into Mr. McGregor's garden". (Lane, 1946, p. 55)

Potter creates a story for Noel – a story that brings her illustrations to life. She names her characters – 'Flopsy', 'Mopsy', 'Cottontail', 'Old Mrs Bunny' and 'Peter'. Interestingly, the side characters all have childlike names whilst Potter's protagonist is given the name 'Peter'; she creates a home for her characters and includes a dialogue. Alongside his drawings, Larkin too invents stories for his reader, stories with striking echoes of the Flopsy Bunnies – except

for Larkin he is constantly involving the reader and asking them questions, thereby inviting his reader (on this occasion, his mother) to participate in the storytelling:

> My froggy is sitting in the window looking out at the park: he greatly enjoyed his jaunt to King's Lynn with your froggy. What well-travelled froggies they are! How they enjoyed sitting in the lounge when we had our tea on the afternoon when we arrived! Will you take yours to Abbeyfield? I think you should, unless you mean to go back and visit him often. (Larkin to Eva, 31 July 1971, Booth, 2018, p. 480)

> Froggy is here, looking out of the window at the dismal scene. He asks how your froggy enjoyed Abbeyfield. Did he have a comfortable bed? My froggy sleeps in my wool hat, very cosy. (Larkin to Eva, 29 August 1971, p. 482)

> Froggy is sitting in the middle, highly satisfied with having got the mantelpiece to himself for once. He sends his regards to your Froggy. He says *some* people are very lucky in being put to bed every night. (Larkin to Eva, 19 January 1972, p. 487)

'Froggy' is clearly based on two toys that Larkin and Eva both own. However, in these letters, both 'froggies' are as alive as Potter's rabbits are. Larkin gives them human attributes as one asks after the other; he creates settings for his 'Froggy' so that Eva can visualise him – sleeping on a wool hat, sitting on the mantelpiece. In doing so, Larkin creates a fiction of letter writing, enabling Larkin and his mother to enter their own constructed story world and create personae for themselves. We know that they already do this through their illustrations, but the creation of these stories further removes Larkin's letters to Eva from their actual lives. These child-like stories could be argued to reflect or reinforce the intimacy between Larkin and his mother. However, I would aver that they tell us less about their relationship in reality than that in their letters, Larkin and Eva indulged in a fictionalised world created by the epistle.

Unsurprisingly, it is not just with Eva that Larkin creates stories that echo Potter's tales. He invents stories for Jones, inclusive of both their characters – Rabbit and Seal / creature – so they become not sender and recipient of a letter, but part of their own story:

> Have you filled in my cheque? I dread seeing 'fifty point' scrawled on it in an unambiguous rabbit hand – very trusting of me, giving a blank cheque to a rabbit!

> Their moral balance is none too reliable. A vision of all the fun to be had for £50 passes over their brains & before they know where they are the thing's done. Great hats with feathers in, velvet coats with pearly buttons, days out on the river – oh, what fun. Then in a few days the stoat policeman comes looking for one of them, and there are many shufflings and lyings and rabbits being bundled out of one warren into another for a few days – oh yes! Never a conviction. It's the most difficult thing in the world, getting a conviction at River Bunny. (Larkin to Jones, 10 February 1955, Thwaite, 2011, p. 144)

The similarities between the non-convicted rabbits at River Bunny, and those at Sandbank (the home of Potter's Flopsy, Mopsy, Cottontail and Peter) living under a tree are striking. The 'stoat policeman' searches River Bunny for those guilty of spending Larkin's money just as Mr McGregor tries to catch Potter's rabbits who sneak into his garden to eat his vegetables. In Potter's letter to Noel, the art is immediately recognisable as it became her famous and most memorable tale. However, in Larkin's personal letters, the stories are no less fictional than in Potter's tales. Larkin does differ, however, from Potter's story telling in his letters. In her letters, she is telling her reader a story, and inventing characters for their entertainment. Whilst on occasion Larkin does do this, as we have just seen with the letters written to his mother, his sister and Jones, Larkin's primary focus when he includes illustrations or fictional characters tends to be to involve himself and his reader in the epistolary fiction.

Larkin adopts a tone which echoes the tone of Potter when constructing these fictionalisations. In *The Tale of Peter Rabbit,* Potter writes, 'Flopsy, Mopsy and Cotton-tail, who were good little bunnies' (Potter, 2002, p. 16) or describes Peter as a 'fat little rabbit' (p. 48), Larkin adopts the exact same language with Jones and zoomorphisises Jones: He frequently closes his letters to Jones by calling her some sort of rabbit. To quote a few: 'You sound as if you want comforting. Fat rabbit lovely pretty rabbit' (Larkin to Jones, 3 November 1958, Thwaite, 2011, p.245) and again in 1960: 'You are such a nice rabbit – really thoroughly nice' (Larkin to Jones, 4 October 1960, p. 320); 'Goodnight, dear rabbit,

goodnight, sweet rabbit, goodnight, goodnight, goodnight' (Larkin to Jones, 27 April 1955, p. 156). Notably, in this final letter there is also an echo of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* – or indeed Eliot's *The Waste Land*: 'Goodnight sweet ladies. Good night good night' (Shakespeare, 2005, pp. Act 4, Scene 5; Eliot, 2011, pp. Act 4, Scene 5, Line 174). These literary allusions to Shakespeare, Eliot and Potter in Larkin's language keep these letters firmly outside the realms of biography.

Larkin not only construct zoomorphic characters for Jones, but he does also with his mother. In 1950, he writes to Eva, 'I hope you returned home to your burrow and found comfort in a fire' (Larkin to Eva, 31 December 1950, Booth, 2018, p. 127). 'See you on Saturday – just give me a rug & a basket in a corner, and a bone to gnaw' (Larkin to Eva, 23 January 1944, p.65). 'It was nice to hear that you had been sleeping in your own basket for once, though not because you had a cold' (Larkin to Eva, 28 November 1956, p.197). 'Dear puss, I hope you lay your head on your paws and snooze long snoozes' (Larkin to Eva, 13 May 1948, p. 122). To Jones, he addresses her as 'Dearest Ears' (Larkin to Jones, 6 October 1951, Thwaite, 2011, p. 60), and signs the letter referring to himself as 'paws' (p. 61), or 'Dear Furry-Face' (Larkin to Jones, 22 November 1951, p. 71). , just as Larkin refers to Eva 'sleeping in [her] basket for once', so he also compares Jones' home to that of an animal: 'Hope you are vanishing into the burrow of sleep' (Larkin to Jones, 23 May 1951, p. 38). By transforming the women in his life into animals, Larkin is involving his reader in his fictional constructions. They are no longer Monica Jones, or Patsy Strang; they are now the character that Larkin has firmly placed in his mind. In doing so, they all become part of the role-play that he has invented in letter writing. Magaretta Jolly and Liz Stanley assert, 'while the familiar letter may be valued for its personality, authenticity or intimacy, the meaning of those effects is specific not just to time and place but addressee' (Jolly and Stanley, 2005, p. 93, also cited on p. 128). The addressee is of exceptional importance when looking at all of

Larkin's letter because they become part of the role-play he is adopting. For example, when Eva responds to Larkin about 'Froggy', she adopts a similar tone: 'My froggy is sitting patiently waiting to go to bed. He could do with a bit more stuffing in him' (Eva to Larkin, 10 January 1972, Booth, 2018, p. 487). Admittedly, Eva does not quite bring 'Froggy' to life in the way that Larkin does. However, she does attempt to indulge in his fictionalised world. This can also be see when she adopts the role of the Creature: 'How I do love your 'creatures'. It is amazing how each one conveys so much meaning in such few lines – and they are all the same and yet have such different expressions, and all are so full of action.' (Eva to Larkin, 14 February 1944, pp. x-xi). Booth informs us that Eva attempted to engage fully in the role of Old Creature: 'She tried to emulate him, painstakingly drafting images of herself with long hair in pencil before inking them in' (p. xi). Eva was not the only one who indulged in Larkin's fictitious world. Jones, who adopted her role as Bun, recognised, too, that their epistolary world was also a step away from reality:

> I wish I could spend what is left with you, or more of what is left than I do spend. I can write this, just, but I'm sure I couldn't say it – I am not in tears, but tears are behind my eyes making my head ache. If once I start thinking of reality, *all* the sad things lock to my mind at once, & all the impossibility and difficulty of life. (Jones to Larkin, 26/27 September 1962, Thwaite, 2011, p. 304)

Both Larkin and Jones found it easier to communicate through the letter than they could in reality. They both present fictitious versions of themselves, usually through Rabbit and Seal / creature and find it difficult to leave their constructed world. Thus, with any letter, the addressees play as significant of a role as Larkin: they support him to step out of reality and live in his fictional world.

Though Eva and Jones remained Larkin's main correspondents to indulge Larkin in his zoomorphic world, they were not the only women for whom Larkin constructs epistolary fictions. In fact, he did it with all of the women in his life. Not only does Larkin include himself as a character, telling a visual story of what he is wearing, what he is doing, how he is

feeling, but he draws on his imagination and includes his reader. As we have noted already above (p. 101), when writing to Patsy Strang Larkin asks, ‘what have you been doing? I imagine you curled up on that sofa in the window staring over the dipping country as the fat clouds drift through the empty air. Is that where you settle?’ (Larkin to Strang, 9 June 1953 Thwaite, 1992, p. 200). To Barbara Pym (as cited on p. 98): ‘I should like to think of you correcting proofs all through the holiday, or even writing something new’ (Larkin to Pym, 7 April 1977, Bodleian, MS. Pym 152). With Jones, he sets the scene for her story: ‘I shall always remember the fireplace & the cricket-bin & all the battery of things on the mantelpiece, Fifi & blue Neddy & the flowered lamp. Your life there has come into extremely sharp focus for me now: heating milk, singing in the kitchen, drying stockings, etc’ (Larkin to Jones, 1 October 1950, Thwaite, 2011, p. 10) (cited on pp. 98 and 149). In 1970 he writes to Eva: ‘I often wonder when you get my letters – whether you are up and dressed and having your morning coffee, or whether you are still in bed & waiting to be ‘got up’ (Larkin to Eva, 11 May 1972, Booth, 2018, p. 360). For Larkin, it is very important that his reader – with Eva and Jones - is included in the text itself. More than this, by telling his reader how he is imagining them, he brings the characters that he creates to life. What is interesting is that Larkin seems to be imagining them all (Pym aside) in a domestic setting. When writing to Kingsley Amis, Larkin is certainly not visualising him ‘heating milk’ or reading his letters in bed. In fact, Larkin does not tend to try to visualise the male reader at all, or at the very least, he does not tell them that he is. He only sets the scene for his female recipients. The fictionality that is prevalent in these letters further reinforces the argument that Larkin’s letters are not solely biographical. Rather, like his letters to Amis, his letters to Eva, Jones, and his other female correspondents position writer and recipient between art and reality. By imagining his recipient, Larkin is able to step out of his own reality and open the door onto his created world. Furthermore, not only does he do this by imagining their domestic settings

but he creates individual caricatures for all these women as well – he as creature, they as some small furry animal.

As we know, he assigns the role of the Rabbit to Jones, and Old Creature to Eva, but this manufacturing of characters does not stop there. Maeve Brennan becomes a mouse, or indeed, 'good mouse' (Larkin to Brennan, 19 October 1970, Brennan, 2002, p. 209), reflecting the language of Potter when she refers to the rabbits as 'good'. Patsy Strang alternates between a variety of animals: 'goodnight, valuable honeybird, fabulous giraffe' (Larkin to Strang, 18 July 1952, Thwaite, 1992, p. 186) – but he tends to stick with either a cat or a bear: 'Bears might pick up muffs in the winter sales – I didn't try but you might' (Larkin to Strang, 4 January 1953, p.192). Judy Egerton is also a cat. He seems to struggle to find a name for Winifred Arnott, but nevertheless attempts to draw her in to a similar dialogue: I don't mind mice in theory, but in *practice* I'd as soon they *kept their distance*. How do *you* feel about them? (Larkin to Arnott, August 1951, p. 174). Although Arnott would not indulge Larkin's affectionate pet naming of 'sweet', he still attempts to involve her in his creations: 'Sorry about 'sweet', but to tell you the truth the phrase came so naturally I didn't think twice about it […] Alternatively, you can consider yourself a small furry animal' (Larkin to Arnott, 26 July 1954, p.206). By fashioning these zoomorphic roles for his recipients, Larkin is allowing them to enter into his own epistolary world. These women are no longer Strang, Arnott, Brennan or Egerton, but are characters in Larkin's epistolary stories. He involves them by asking them questions about their surroundings – he wants them to be a part of it. The characters created by Larkin are the hinge, mediating between fiction and reality, and allowing Larkin to live in between both worlds.

The creation of the Creature, and Potter's influence over it, are of significant importance when considering Larkin's letters. The release of *Letters Home* has allowed Larkin scholarship to recognise for the first time how much of a role his illustrations, character

construction and storytelling played in Larkin's letters. It was to his mother that Larkin planted the foundations for the construction of the Creature and the adoption of personae, but it did not stop with her. 'Writing home' was only the beginning and helped establish Larkin's curiosity with letter writing, the launch of his role playing, and the start of his use of the letter as the hinge that allowed him to swing between reality and the worlds this allowed him to create.

Reviewing the letters of Evelyn Waugh, Larkin wrote: 'A writer's letters stand midway between literature and biography' (Thwaite, 2001, p. 288). In his own letters, Larkin was successful in keeping his letters at this midway point. His included some biographical information that has allowed biographers and critics to piece together Larkin's life. However, we will never have the full picture because Larkin used literature in his letters to escape from his biographical reality and live in the multiple worlds that he constructed on paper. For Larkin, this was the very essence of writing; to be able to place one foot on each side of the door. This theme is at the core of Larkin's epistolary writing and for this reason I will finish this section with a final exploration of a cache of Larkin's poetry that encapsulates the importance of art in allowing us to escape from reality, if only for a little while.

'The Importance of Elsewhere'

Through an exploration of Larkin's letters, this thesis has demonstrated Larkin's desire to step out of reality by creating fictional - arguably ideal - worlds. Through his ability to adopt personae, the epistle became for Larkin a metaphorical door allowing Larkin to hinge between the real and fictional worlds. In his introduction to *Letters Home*, Booth argues that it is Larkin's mother, Eva, who haunts Larkin's poetry (Booth, 2018, p. xlviii). However, I would contend that it is not necessarily Eva herself that is at the heart of the poetry, but what his letters to her symbolise: Larkin's struggle between the world as it is, and the worlds he

recreates in his letters. This creative impulse dominates his writing from the beginning: Larkin taking on the persona of Brunette Coleman creating stories where the characters did not want to re-enter the real world; his two novels which exposes the desire to reinvent yourself through the epistle; his personal letters which encapsulate how he constructed fictionalised versions of himself; his poem 'Letter to a Friend About Girls', emphasising the longing to live in a world outside of our own. There is a correlation in how his letters to Eva allow Larkin to step into his fictional worlds in the same way that the speakers in his poetry and prose fictions move from one world to another. The character of the Creature, the reading of Beatrix Potter, the story telling; all aid Larkin to step back into youth – not necessarily his biographical childhood, but rather the promises and the ideals that youth represent. In Larkin's verse, then, no less than in the letters, creativity and reality compete for prominence, as the speakers of Larkin's poetry are often transcending their world by entering a bygone time – either through art, music, posters, poetry, or simply through memory. At the core of Larkin's letters and his poetry is a move away from the confines of reality and a recognition of 'The Importance of Elsewhere'.

Larkin's second volume of poetry, *The Less Deceived* (1955), opens with 'Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album'. Beyond the photographs themselves, the focus of this poem is the art of photography and its ability to move the speaker out of his reality momentarily. The poem opens with the speaker mesmerised by the photographs:

> At last you yielded up the album, which,
> Once open, sent me distracted. All your ages
> Matt and glossy on the thick black pages. (Burnett, 2012, pp. 27, lines 1-3)

The pictures allow the speaker to step out of his own world as he observes her life. His 'swivel eye hungers from pose to pose' (6), he watches the lady's childhood as she poses in 'pigtails' (7), as a 'sweet girl-graduate' (8) or on a summers' day. For the speaker,

photography stands aside as it differs from all other art forms: ‘But o, photography! As no art is, / Faithful and disappointing!’ (16-17). The art of photography gives the speaker the illusion that he is truly a part of his subject’s world, as it ‘Records / Dull days as dull, and hold-it smiles as frauds, / And will not censor blemishes’ (17-19). When looking at the photographs, the speaker momentarily feels that they are able to catch an authentic version of the young lady’s previous life as they show

> the cat as disinclined, and shades
> a chin as doubled when it is, what grace
> your candour thus confers upon her face!
> How overwhelmingly persuades,
> That this is a real girl in a real place,
>
> In every sense empirically true! (21-26)

However, they have deceived him by giving the impression that he can be a part of that world and experience it as she did. It has misled him to believe that he is truly there – a part of her youth. However, reality begins to pierce through the speaker’s imagination and he knows he can no longer stay:

> Is it just *the past*? Those flowers, that gate,
> These misty parks and motors, lacerate
> Simply by being you, you
> Contract my heart by looking out of date. (27-30)

The speaker is served an abrupt reminder that he was never a part of her world; the photographs preserve *her* youth, not *his*. The images allowed him momentarily to pass through, bringing the photographs to life through imagination. However, what he imagines happened, and the truth of how things were, remain at a distance. In this sense, the art of photography is only the threshold: he may open the door, but he cannot close it behind him. Clutching to the handle in desperation, the speaker wonders if she ‘would spot the theft / of this one’ (39-40). However, the reality is: ‘In short, a past that no one can share / No matter who is your future’ (41-42). No matter how he feels about it or what stories he creates in his

mind, he is an observer, not a participator. He becomes ‘less deceived’ by photography’s ability to transcend him out of reality as he is brutally transported back by being ‘out of date’. Though the photos are forever young, he is not. The realisation of reality intercepting is at the crux of this poem, just as it is in Larkin’s letters, particularly to Eva, when the attentive son of the letters is exposed as irascible and impatient in reality. In his letters, Larkin always hinges between the real world and the one he creates. However, as he wrote in ‘I Remember, I Remember’, ‘nothing, like something, happens anywhere’ – Larkin was determined to find ‘something’ amongst the nothing.

In Larkin’s next collection, *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964), the tension between the imaginary and reality continues. In ‘Love Songs in Age’ the speaker tells of how his subject transcends her world momentarily through music. The female subject of the poem has kept her vinyl records from a time long ago, each one telling a tale from her youth:

> One bleached from lying in a sunny place,
> One marked in circles by a vase of water,
> One mended, a tidy fit had seized her
> And coloured, by her daughter - (p.51, lines 3-6).

She stumbles upon them in her ‘widowhood’ (7), as she is ‘looking for something else’ (8): the memories right where she left them, carefully preserved on the record sleeves. As she begins to play the music, it moves her from the present world to her past as she

> Stood
>
> Relearning how each frank submissive chord
> Had ushered in
> Word after sprawling hyphenated word,
> After the unfailing sense of being young
> Spread out like a spring-woken tree, wherein
> That hidden freshness sung,
> That certainty of time laid up in store
> As when she played it first. (8-16)

The nuances and resonances of the music removes her from the painful reality of widowhood and returns her to her youth, to when the new year presented a multitude of possibilities. As she basks in her temporary world, reality violently penetrates through the music:

> The glare of that much-mentioned brilliance, love,
> Broke out, to show
> Its bright incipience sailing above,
> Still promising to solve, and satisfy,
> And set unchangeably in order. (17-21)

As the promises of youth all come flooding back, she realises that through the passing of time these ideals have never changed. Wounded now, she realises that what she imagined as a young girl was forever out of reach. The passage of time has not made these dreams achievable; therefore, she painfully piles the records back on the shelf. The promises of youth had gone. The reality is that love 'had not done so then, and could not now' (24). She stops the music as she loses her impulse to imagine a better place and a happier time. This poem perfectly encapsulates how art – in this case music – allows us to step out of the real world and hold on to ideals that simply cannot be achieved in reality. Larkin's letters to Eva echo this: in these, Larkin can temporarily step into a fictional world that holds the promise of youth – where he can create stories about 'Froggy' and draw childish sketches. He invites Eva to join him in this world, to return like the widow in 'Love Songs in Age', to a time of possibility and freedom rather than being confined to her widowhood and old age.

As we have explored, in his letters Larkin always attempted to imagine his reader – either by directly asking questions by creating a setting for them. This is predominantly found in his correspondence with women. His poem 'Broadcast' from the *Whitsun Weddings* explores a similar theme, with the speaker tuning into a concert on the radio and imagining a woman there. At the first 'snivel on the violins' (p.53, line 4) the speaker transcends his living room to imagine himself seated at the concert:

> I think of your face among all those faces,

Beautiful and devout before
Cascades of monumental slithering,
One of your gloves unnoticed on the floor
Beside those new, slightly-outmoded shoes. (6-10)

The music prompts him vividly to create a scene in his mind of his female friend at the concert as if he were there with her. By including the delicate details such as the unnoticed glove, the speaker is bringing the scene to life in his imagination and is momentarily in that world with her, sharing the experience, rather than at home by himself. The speaker in the poem creates a story for his female friend in a similar way to the settings Larkin creates for the women in his life: Patsy Strang curled up on the sofa; Monica Jones at home doing laundry; Barbara Pym correcting proofs. His creative impulse is launched through the epistle whereas in 'Broadcast' it is music that prompts the speaker to create imaginative worlds. However, as Larkin in his letters must cross the threshold back into reality, so does the speaker of 'Broadcast': 'It goes quickly dark. I lose / All but the outline' (11-12). As the music comes to a halt, the speaker struggles to remain in his imaginary world. However, similarly to 'Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album', he makes one final attempt to stay:

rabid storms of chording
By being distant overpowers my mind
All the more shamelessly, their cut-off shout
Leaving me desperate to pick out
Your hands, tiny in all that air, applauding. (14-18)

The speaker is being severed from his creative world, moving further away from her. As the chords stop, so does his fictional impulses. He knows it is inevitable that he will return to the real world; he has one final anguished attempt to hold the image. However, now that the music has stopped, so has his imagination. As Larkin's letters are a door that allow him to step in and out of reality, so is the music to the speaker in 'Broadcast'. So long as the music is

playing, the speaker can hinge between both worlds – he knows he cannot leave his reality, but he refuses to give up on the importance of elsewhere.

In the same collection, Larkin's poem 'Wild Oats' reflects back twenty years to remember 'A bosomy English rose' (p.68, line 3) who was always unattainable to him. Like in a 'Letter to a Friend about Girls', the speaker feels as though he lives in a separate world to her and therefore has to play in his own 'league':

> her friend in specs I could talk to.
> Faces in those days sparked
> The whole shooting-match off, and I doubt
> If ever one had like hers:
> But it was the friend I took out. (4-8)

When dating the rose's friend, the speaker never felt as content and after 'five rehearsals' (17-18), they decided to go their separate ways. However, the speaker never let go of how he imagined life would be like with the English rose: 'In my wallet are still two snaps / Of bosomy rose with fur gloves on' (22-23). By keeping the 'snap' of her, the speaker can hold on to the ideal world he imagined he and she would share. Moreover, this English rose is once again a reminder of the promise of youth – one which the speaker refuses to let go of – by holding onto this photo for twenty years.

With Larkin edging ever further away from youth by the time he published his final collection, *High Windows* (1974), we see in this collection that the inability to remain in imaginative worlds – such as youth – prevails. The poem 'High Windows' explores how the speaker feels further removed from the younger generation – both physically and mentally – than ever before:

> When I see a couple of kids
> And guess he's fucking her and she's
> Taking pills or wearing a diaphragm,
> I know this is paradise
>
> Everyone has dreamed of all their lives – (p.80, lines 1-5)

The speaker feels entirely on the outside of this world, looking on at the 'kids', imagining the freedom they feel and their debauchery. This world that is so far removed from his own must be heaven:

> Bonds and gestures pushed to one side
> Like an outdated combine harvester,
> And everyone young going down the long side
>
> To happiness, endlessly. (6-9)

The traditions of the speaker's generation have become irrelevant. 'Kids' today are no longer confined to marriage or other gestures but rather have endless freedom and entertainment. However, in this moment he begins to realise that he will not be the only person to have experienced this feeling: 'I wonder if / Anyone looked at me, forty years back, / And thought, *That'll be the life*' (9-11). Like the widow in 'Love Songs in Age', the speaker can no longer feel the ideals and promises of youth:

> And immediately
>
> Rather than words comes the thought of high windows:
> The sun-comprehending glass,
> And beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows
> Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless. (16-20)

As the speaker becomes further removed from this new world, and becomes too cynical to bask in his imagination, he begins to lose hope in his own reality and in what the world has to offer. Similarly, in 'Annus Mirabilus', the speaker feels that he is always one step behind the real world: 'Sexual intercourse began / In nineteen sixty-three / (Which was rather late for me)' (p.90, lines 1-3). He is, at first, envious of the younger generation, who can live a completely different reality from his own:

> Then all at once the quarrel sank:
> Everyone felt the same,
> And every life became
> A brilliant breaking of the bank,
> A quite unlosable game. (11-15)

He longs to be part of this world where life is not confined by 'a wrangle for a ring' (8) but rather a life of prime and liberty. However, by the end, the speaker concludes that 'life was never better than / In nineteen sixty-three / (Though just too late for me)' (16-18). This world has slipped through his fingertips. Although it is a life he has always dreamed of, it never became his own reality.

Finally, Larkin's poem 'Sad Steps', also in *High Windows*, which alludes to Sir Philip Sidney's Sonnet 31 in *Astrophil and Stella* (1580), rejects the ideal of youth entirely. As the speaker is 'Groping back to bed after a piss' (p.89, line 1), he is stunned by 'the moon's cleanliness' (3). Transfixed by its beauty – 'the way the moon dashes through clouds' (7) – the speaker indulges in a moment of Romanticism, glorifying nature and the past, and directly addressed the moon: 'Lozenge of love! Medallion of art! / O wolves of memory! Immensements!' (11-12). Immediately, he stops himself: 'No, / One shivers slightly, looking up there' (12-13). The speaker closes the door on the imaginative world the moon is luring him towards. For him, it is too long ago. Now, the moon is only: 'a reminder of the strength and pain / Of being young; that it can't come again' (16-17). He knows now he cannot return to that world. However, he knows that for many the power of the moon is still as important as it used to be for him. The speaker concludes that the possibility is 'for others undiminished somewhere' (18). He is too far away from his youth to indulge in fantasies, but the moon and art are still here for those who can. Unlike Sidney's impassioned apostrophe to the moon, as his speaker calls on it for answers: 'O Moon, tell me / Is constant love deem'd there but want of wit?' (Sidney, 1580, lines 9-10), Larkin's speaker rejects the moon and the possibilities it might offer.

By 1974, when *High Windows* was published, youth for Larkin was becoming more and more distant and this is reflected in Larkin's later poems. However, pervading the same edition, there lay the instinct to indulge in the imagination and the creative impulses that are

brought to life through art and memory. Prior to his final collection, Larkin's verse clearly demonstrates a desire to step outside of reality and live in Larkin's created world. His speakers achieve this through photography, music, a 'snap' in their wallet, thereby demonstrating a reluctance to return to the real world. Larkin's epistolary writing is no different. Larkin began writing home in 1936 and from that moment on inhabited more than one world. His letters reveal the twentieth-century poet performing in various epistolary roles that all enabled him temporarily to leave his reality and indulge in artistic freedom. Though Larkin's speakers in the poems may have become less enamoured of the possibilities of youth with the passing of time, the Creature was determined to remain in the imaginative world, allowing Larkin, for over forty years, to hold on to the importance of elsewhere.

Conclusion

Part III of this thesis has primarily focused on the most recent edition of Larkin's letters to be published: *Letters Home*. Following its release in 2018, reviews demonstrated that this ground-breaking book unveiled, yet again, the real Larkin. This perception is amplified by Booth's introduction to the letters. For Booth, 'Larkin's letters home make a consistent thread through his life' (Booth, 2018, p. xiv). He depicts the relationship between Larkin and his family as one of the most intimate, and thereby intimates that his edition of Larkin's letters is more revealing of the real Larkin than the earlier editions edited by Thwaite. However, as this section has demonstrated, when Larkin was writing home, he adopted a multitude of personae – the matter of fact, literature expert (for his father Sydney); the lyrical genius (for his sister Kitty); and for his mother, Eva, the doting son. Though Booth does recognise that Larkin adapted his style to suit his reader, his argument is problematic. Booth picks and chooses which personae are authentic and which are fictional. For example, when discussing Larkin's racism, he argues that Larkin was merely adapting his style to reflect the attitudes of his reader while at the same time upholding as 'genuine' the caring and affectionate son who

speaks in Larkin's letters to Eva. However, Booth cannot have it both ways. Rather than determining which presentations of Larkin are true, Part III has instead focused on the most creative aspects of Larkin's letter writing to further dispel the notion that Larkin's letters are firmly biographical.

This section has drawn upon, for the first time, Larkin's Creature in his letters to cast a light on the imaginative worlds that exist within his epistolary fictions. The creation of this self-caricature acted as a hinge allowing Larkin to swing between his reality and the world that he created. Larkin distinguishes the Creature as something that is quite different from people in the real world – both in appearance and in action. Moreover, he invites his mother to participate in this shared fictitious world where she adopts the role of 'Old Creature': a role that started in 1950 and only ceased when Eva died in 1977. During this time, Larkin used both Creature and Old Creature to create stories, illustrate feelings and emotions, and dominate the letter. Their inclusion brought the text in the letter to life, as well as firing Larkin's imaginative fictions. However, the disparity between fiction and reality becomes clear when Larkin has to profusely apologise to his mother when it emerges that he cannot live up to the ideal of the affectionate son that he created through his letters.

Following 'The Tale of the Creature', we then explored the influence Beatrix Potter had over Larkin's epistolary writing. Larkin was an avid reader of her work and expressed his admiration for her regularly – particularly to the women in his life. This is significant in that it is in his letters to the women in his life that Larkin draws on Potter's style. Firstly, his illustrations – though obviously more cartoonish – do echo those found in the Potter tales, both in their appearance and also in the dominance they have over the text. Though the Creature was created for Larkin's correspondence with his mother, the creative impulse was carried across to his other correspondents – Jones as rabbit, Strang as cat, Brennan as mouse – as they all indulged in Larkin's imagined world. As the illustrations in Potter's tales bring

the story to life, so Larkin's sketches tell the story of his letters. Secondly, the language in Larkin's letters echo that of Potter's tales: how he addresses his recipient; the zoomorphism he employs; the childlike language. Potter's presence across Larkin's letters places them further outside biographical realms as the fictionality takes precedence.

Finally, as this thesis draws to a close, Part III has demonstrated the importance of recognising the struggle between the real and the imagined in Larkin's poetry, as well as his letters and prose fictions. When writing to family, friends, and colleagues, Larkin was always ready to cross the threshold into the fictional world and this theme can be transferred across to his poetry. 'The Importance of Elsewhere' is a leitmotif that dominated all of Larkin's writing. We have seen how selected poems from *The Less Deceived*, *The Whitsun Weddings* and *High Windows*, all demonstrate how Larkin's letters were not the only door that Larkin opened onto fictional realms. Through music, art, or memory, Larkin's speakers enter imaginative worlds in his poems – worlds usually associated with youth – and demonstrate foot-dragging back through the door to reality.

Overall, Part III has demonstrated that Larkin's letters are not necessarily the key to unlocking Larkin the man, but rather Larkin the writer. When Larkin put pen to paper – whether to write a letter or draw a sketch – he was exploring the possibilities of art and where his imagination could take him.

Conclusion

> Because his poems seem to inhabit a middle ground between fiction and non-fiction, Larkin is able to manipulate his readers at the same time that he engages with them. (Steinberg, 2010, p. 3)

To date, Larkin scholarship has clearly demonstrated Larkin's manipulation of the reader in his poetry: are his poems biographical? Or do they avoid biography entirely? Did he really travel to London during Whitsun in 1955? Was his final published poem, 'Aubade', prompted by his mother's death? Does his use of 'simplistic' language demonstrate Realism (as he himself manifested)? Does the unreliable speaker and literary allusions mean Larkin is a Modernist? It is precisely Larkin's deft manipulations that has continued to engage readers of his poetry since the 1940s. However, Larkin's 'personal' letters have attracted as much critical engagement as the poetry – it is a rarity in Larkin studies to find a recent essay that bears no mention of his epistolary writing. Yet most scholarship today still assumes that Larkin's letters are lenses onto Larkin's life. Redressing this, this study has sought to move critical attention away from Larkin's engagement with the reader of his poetry towards his engagement with the reader of his letters and his ability to manipulate and engage them within the fictional worlds Larkin created – both personal and posthumous.

The primary concern of 'Epistolary Larkin' has been to remove these letters from the restricting biographical readings that had told the story of Larkin for so long. By navigating the letters out of this realm towards interpretation of the fiction within them, it has revealed that Larkin's letters warrant as much textual scrutiny as the literary texts themselves. It has done so firstly, by mapping out the division of the critical landscape caused by publication of the three editions of the letters, first demonstrating the many critics who have drawn upon the letters as windows to look upon Larkin's life and guides to the poetry. Second, this study has also drawn attention to the contradictions that critics have found in interpreting the poetry in this light. For both sets of critics, the letters play a vital role in supporting what is normally considered more important in literary criticism: the texts. However, this study brought the

letters to the centre stage of Larkin studies to dramatize their role in Larkin's literary writing: the letters are not portals for Larkin's life or literariness, but we suggest, are texts themselves. They are the hinge that allows Larkin to shift between two worlds – the real and the imagined.

Embedded throughout this study are sharp focused textual readings of the letters as the primary methodology. Part I recognised the exaggeration of masculinity presented within the world of Larkin and Kingsley Amis by zooming in on their use of hyperbolic language, their shared repetition of themes, and their self-mockery. This fictional world was then magnified by drawing on Larkin's letters *to* women, to balance my discussion of his letters *about* them. The letters written to Patsy Strang, Barbara Pym, Brenda Moon and Maeve Brennan presented a more affectionate and caring version of Larkin. They were not being upheld in this thesis as honest reflections of Larkin – they certainly are not – but they magnified the distance between the two Larkins: the Larkin for Amis and the Larkin for them. Part II continued to exemplify Larkin's careful construction of epistolary characters in his letters to Monica Jones. As Thwaite's second edition presented an entirely unrecognisable version of Larkin to the first, I closely analysed the fictitious world that Larkin created for Jones and invited her to join. Initiated by the creation of 'Rabbit' and 'Seal', Larkin's epistolary world allows he and Jones to live in the imaginary, separated from reality – marriage, cohabitation, conflict – before having to return. This allowed him to present multiple versions of himself: affectionate, gentle; needy; hostile to children – all characteristics he knew his reader would approve of. Part III, finally, explored the letters that threaded throughout Larkin's epistolary life: *Letter's Home*. Published in 2018, these previously buried letters had never before been seen by the public eye. They unveiled yet another version of Larkin that questioned previous initial conceptions of Larkin the man: was his childhood really as 'unspent' as he claimed? Did he really want to 'get out' as early as he could? Was he really the dutiful son for writing

to his mother every day (as he presented himself to Jones) or was he closer to his family – particularly to his mother – than we could ever have anticipated? Rather than answering these questions as biographers will no doubt attempt to do in future, Part III has once again been concerned to examine the letters to unveil the epistolary world that he created when writing home. Larkin's letters to his sister, his father and particularly his mother demonstrate Larkin's ability to adapt his role and enter the multitude of worlds he created for them: the world of the literary genius for Kitty; a sphere of literary sophistication and pretention for Sydney; and the world of the Creature for Eva. The latter is of the most significance as the inclusion of the sketches, the childlike language and the storytelling magnify the epistolary creation that took place when Larkin began writing a letter. The sketches and language found in his letters to his mother were evidently transferred across to many of the other significant women in his life. This final part draws on these sketches to bring Larkin's imaginary worlds out from behind the shadows of biography. As a secondary methodology, each part drew upon Larkin's literary texts – poetry, prose, short stories – and essays in order only to reinforce my argument about the fictional worlds that Larkin creates in his letters and which, I maintain, followed through to his literary writing. Moreover, those literary texts and essays all helped reveal the unreliability of approaches that read Larkin's letters as biographical, helping lift the letters out of the biographical realm and place them alongside the literary texts themselves.

This thesis was specifically structured in the chronological order of the publications of Larkin's letters (I. *Selected Letters* (1992), II. *Letters to Monica* (2010), III. *Letters Home* (2018)) not only to highlight the various of personae located within all three editions but also to demonstrate the power of each edition of letters in shaping our views of Larkin the man. By this I mean that throughout each part of this study, I explored the important role played by each of Larkin's editors in changing perceptions of Larkin depending on the version they

presented to readers. Evidently both editors – Thwaite and Booth – have been successful in presenting the versions of Larkin that suited their agenda: Larkin the misogynistic misanthropist in 1992, Larkin the not so misanthropic gentle and affectionate companion in 2010, and finally Larkin the dutiful and caring son who devoted his life to ensuring his mother felt safe in 2018. However, in Part III I posed one very important question: would our perception of Larkin have changed had the order of release been reversed? This was a question that I began with when I took on the task of 'Epistolary Larkin'. The answer: more than likely. My second question: 'Would an exhaustive edition of Larkin's letters – inclusive of all his correspondences – highlight his interweaving of worlds?' Possibly. However, as I conducted my research for this study, I realised that there were far more pressing questions about the publications of letters more generally.

Letters Home was indeed significant in its presentation of yet another version of Larkin, one that made readers pause and recognise that it can be no coincidence that all three editions of letters present different versions of Larkin. It also played a more significant role, however. In this edition, Booth included one vital element that transformed the reading of Larkin's letters and made the epistolary worlds clearer: he included the reader. Jonathan Ellis argues that in correspondences, 'one person writes a letter, a second person reads it. Then they swap roles' (Ellis, 2015, p. 7). Hermione Lee maintains that 'it is a mistake to think of a letter as a solitary, independent, free – standing document'. A correspondence, she writes, 'must be as part of a relationship that moves through time' (p. 7). With Booth's inclusion of letters from Larkin's correspondent – in this case predominantly Eva – he has allowed readers to see the epistolary relationship and their swapping of roles within their imaginary world. Though Thwaite in his edition of *Letters to Monica*, has footnoted a number of Jones' responses to Larkin's letters, the presentation of these in no way carries the same magnitude as Booth's decision to include Eva's letters in *Letters Home*. By this I mean that in *Letters Home*, we can

clearly see the fictionality of the lives constructed within the letters from and to Creature and Old Creature. As a consequence of Booth's inclusion of Eva's responses, their imaginary world prevails above the biographical insights these letters reveal – and allows us to search out epistolary worlds within Larkin's other letters to other correspondents.

This poses many questions for biographical, literary and Larkin studies: where do letters stand in literary studies? Do Larkin's letters stand separate from other authors by creating fictional versions of himself? If not, how many editions of letters have been read as though the author's life story is told through them? If we only read one side of authorial correspondence, can we truly make an informed conception about the author and their writing? Given this, should we always consider including letters from recipients in future editions of letters?

Interestingly, in Larkin studies the answers to these questions are becoming more and more essential. As recently as 2021, John Sutherland – a personal friend of Monica Jones and the only living scholar to know her personally – makes an important observation in his biography:

> Did I truly know her? I am shaken by some of the things I have now seen in her letters. In her for-your-eyes-only intercourse with Philip there is a veritable basket of snakes: racism, spite, foulmouthed lapses, shared misogyny and acidic streams of downright nastiness. She never opened that basket to me, close as I thought I was to her. (Sutherland, 2021, p. 4)

Since the publication of *Selected Letters*, the majority of assessments of Larkin's character – with the odd exception, for example Bradford's study on Larkin and Amis, *The Odd Couple*, and Underwood's employment of James Sutton and Colin Gunner's replies to Larkin in his study 'Philip Larkin's Textual Identities' – on Larkin have been based of one-sided correspondence that most editions of Larkin's letters present. Here, in 2021, Sutherland recognises a world that was constructed by Larkin and Jones but which he was never privy to.

In fact, the title of Sutherland's biography, *Monica Jones, Philip Larkin and Me*, has never seemed more appropriate. As Larkin and his individual reader leave reality and enter their imaginative world, they place Sutherland – and all of us – on the outside of it. In a sense we are all Sutherland: we can unpick details of their lives, things that we can evidence with fact, and piece together as much as we can to present our version of them (as Thwaite and Booth have), but we can never know the full story. Like the speaker in 'Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album', we can glimpse at the life, steal images of it even, but we are not part of it. Instead, we remain on the outside of their imaginary worlds, hinged ourselves – like the protagonists in Larkin's novels and short stories, the speakers of his poetry, the recipient of his letter and Larkin himself – between two worlds. Or as the speaker of 'Ignorance' more aptly puts it: not knowing 'what is true or right or real' ((Burnett, 2012, pp. 67, line 2).

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