

Roger Bowen

## Death, Failure, and Survival in the Poetry of Philip Larkin

Turn out your pockets on the table cloth  
Consider what we know. A silver piece:  
That's life; and, dealing in dichotomies,  
This old discoloured copper coin is death.

(from an untitled poem in MS., "finished October 15, 1946")<sup>1</sup>

"life is slow dying" ("Nothing to be Said",

*The Whitsun Weddings*, 1964)

In a recent article J.R. Watson has urged readers of the Larkin canon to be more conscious of the poet as *homo religiosus*, with an "intuitive awareness of the tenuous sacred in the midst of the profane," one who celebrates regeneration and strives to affirm the rites and rituals which we all need so desperately in this "desacralized world".<sup>2</sup> This "other Larkin", whose voice may be heard, for example, in "Church Going" (*The Less Deceived*), "The Whitsun Weddings" (*The Whitsun Weddings*), "To the Sea", "The Trees", "Show Saturday", and "The Explosion" (*High Windows*),<sup>3</sup> has an undoubted claim on our attention. Nonetheless, as the unpublished lines quoted above may remind us, a more familiar and, to some, a more authentic Larkin persistently emphasizes the finality of death and its compromising presence, its "currency", throughout our lives. As Philip Oakes records in his portrait of Larkin, "(he) is appalled by the thought of death . . . his preoccupation as a man and a poet is with mortality." Furthermore, this Larkin is the one who steadfastly adheres to an agnostic humanism: "the only morality I understand has to do with people."<sup>4</sup> There is, to be sure, as Larkin posits in "Here" (*WW*), an "unfenced existence", the metaphysical unknown, but more often than not it remains "untalkative, out of reach". Like Thomas Hardy, to a considerable extent his model following the Yeatsian extravagances of *The North Ship* (1945), Larkin

sometimes strives for "moments of vision" to transcend the harsh outlines of finality, but his skepticism, and the "despotism of the eye"<sup>5</sup> which governs it, is powerful. Perhaps for this reason it has been suggested that Larkin is the modern anti-hero who "can only acknowledge with due honesty the inevitability of his own extinction."<sup>6</sup>

The question of the two profiles in Larkin's poetry—the implacable skeptic and the visionary *manqué*—is best considered in connection with those poems which explore the meaning of death. There emerges gradually a distinction between a view of personal death, which is seen as inevitable and unmitigated, and a view of death in relation to a world which perpetually renews itself. In this latter view—and it is one increasingly exemplified in his latest work—a quiet trust is sometimes apparent, a trust in continuity, a belief in something "undiminished somewhere" ("Sad Steps," *HW*), which will survive beyond his individual "extinction". There is, in addition, a significant body of work which illustrates the proposition that "life is slow dying" ("Nothing to be Said," *WW*). This fundamental idea shapes much of Larkin's perspective on human experience, a perspective, above all, on the habitual deceptions and failures with which our lives are composed, on life which is a succession of deaths, a "repeated fraying of the thread".<sup>7</sup> But we may discern qualifications of this bleak definition of life in his last two volumes.

So, "dealing in dichotomies" proves to be a deceptive procedure. It is not a simple debate between the spirit of life and the spirit of death, not a question of weighing the respective value of the silver and the copper coin. The cool, empirical tone of "Consider what we know" masks ironies, tensions, and fear. Identifying these coins is only the beginning; their symbiotic relationship has to be understood. For Larkin this exercise in comprehension is long and difficult.

## II

In Poem XXIX from Larkin's first published volume, *The North Ship* (1945) the poet advises himself to "Take the grave's part,/ Tell the bone's truth," and to "Walk with the dead/ For fear of death." This commitment to the "bone's truth" manifests itself in various ways throughout Larkin's work, but one of the earliest forms it takes is an attempt to visualize the ghostly figure of Death itself, and to imagine the awesome and arbitrary change from life to oblivion which its presence heralds. Poem II(*NS*) introduces us to "The stranger who will never show his face,/ But asks admittance." In this sonnet the movement

from birth through life to the urgent proximity of death is delicately balanced between the known and the experienced, the clear ability to look back and remember, and the unknown which can only be met with questions and uncertainty. Larkin begins with an early variation of the "million-petalled flower/ Of being here," that "unique endeavour" (from "The Old Fools" *HW*) which is the "miracle" of each individual birth:

This was your place of birth, this daytime palace,  
 This miracle of glass, whose every hall  
 The light of music fills, and on your face  
 Shines petal-soft . . .

Unlike the "lighted tenement scuttling with voices" in "Age" (*LD*), the image of the life experience as a light-filled building is positive and almost utopian in its detail. "Sunbeams", with photographic effect, pick out representative poses: "pausing at a picture's edge/ To puzzle out the name, or with a hand/ Resting a second on a random page—." But the supremacy of light is threatened in the eighth line which is separated from the body of the octet and cuts the sonnet dramatically in two: "The clouds cast moving shadows on the land." The spell is broken, the miraculous mirage of life dissolves, and desperation begins. In a manuscript poem dated 14 September 1946 the same phenomenon is recorded and presented in the form of a definition: "Death is a cloud alone in the sky with the sun."<sup>8</sup> The eclipse, it seems, is inevitable.

The interior settings which begin Poem II are obliterated by this sudden switch to a landscape and a skyscape combined, but they return, negatively, in the sestet. Space narrows, from the "palace" and "hall" to the claustrophobia of one chamber and the mysterious room adjoining it. The poet asks: "Are you prepared for what the night will bring?/ . . . will you greet your doom/ As final; set him loaves and wine; knowing/ The game is finished when he plays his ace,/ And overturn the table and go into the next room?" The answer seems to be that there is no adequate preparation for this last move in a predictable game of chance. Appeasing the stranger with ritual offerings is a recognition only of the consistent skill of a player who never loses. The "next room" contains the secret of what "the night will bring" and we will not likely "go gentle" into it. There is a self-taunting quality to these last lines; the poet pursues a relentless inquiry which tests an impossible coverage.

The helplessness of those who go before this "stranger" for the last encounter is suggested more graphically in an uncompleted and un-

published verse play by Larkin, entitled *Night in the Plague*. Set in London during the Great Plague of 1665 it recounts the preparation of a well-to-do merchant who has finally decided to flee the city with his daughter and, reluctantly, the young girl's beau. The night before the planned departure the clocks in the merchant's house stop and Death appears at the head of the stairs, bidding the two young people come up and watch the father die, to learn of the power and process of death. It is here that the manuscript ends.<sup>9</sup> In a later poem, "Ambulances" (*WW*), there is a modern version of the same kind of random visitation. The ambulances themselves are a kind of twentieth-century plague cart coming "to rest at any kerb:/ All streets in time are visited." Doors are "fastened" by invisible hands, stretchers are "carried" and "stowed" by unseen agents. That traditional "stranger" figure is no longer there; he seems instead to operate continually among us, familiar and unnoticed. He still is present, however, in "The Dedicated", a poem which appeared in the privately-printed *XX Poems* (1951) but was not reprinted in *The Less Deceived* four years later. It begins:

Some must employ the scythe  
 Upon the grasses,  
 That the walks be smooth  
 For the feet of the angel.  
 Some keep in repair  
 The locks, that the visitor  
 Unhindered passes  
 To the innermost chamber.<sup>10</sup>

The stranger here is the "angel" and the "visitor"; life once again is reduced to one inner room when the final reckoning comes. What is unusual is that we, the living, are lent the tool of the angel of death, the scythe, and seem more than implicated in our own doom. The visitation is prepared for; the visitor seems half invited. The entire poem is marked by a passivity and a resignation, almost a death-wish. We await willingly the final extinguishing of light, the "quenching of candles". "The Dedicated" anticipates the most straightforward recognition that "Beneath it all, desire of oblivion runs," in "Wants" (*LD*).

In the poems which confront death in *The Less Deceived* there is a movement away from allegorization, from the traditional visitation by a death figure. In the opening poem of that volume, "Wedding-Wind", a celebration of a wedding night spoken by the new bride, the sense of the "silver" of life is strong. The marriage bonds signify the central passage of life, and on the morning after the first night of that journey the winds

blow in harmony with a newly discovered strength and liberation. Yet in the midst of the bride's elemental happiness comes an inevitable question, one which, significantly, concludes the poem and leaves an air of foreboding and threat:

Can even death dry up  
 These new delighted lakes, conclude  
 Our kneeling as cattle by all-generous waters?

In "Going" that same power of extinction and conclusion assumes a larger shape. Oblivion comes in the guise of evening, "one never seen before,/ That lights no lamps." In the second short stanza it metamorphoses again into a burial shroud, a constriction of space from the fading vision of a landscape of "fields" to the black intimacy of the grave where there are no more perspectives. Time seems to be measured in terms of this growing and changing apprehension. In our younger days, perhaps, death is only a hint in the landscape; over the passage of time, death becomes all. As the lamps are not lit so vision seems to fail, and the last lines, composed of three questions, seem to be spoken by one overcome by darkness and deprived of sight:

Where has the tree gone, that locked  
 Earth to the sky? What is under my hands,  
 That I cannot feel?

What loads my hands down?

Death is now portrayed as an alien and powerful force which can disguise itself, come upon us from the most familiar of surroundings, and deprive its victims steadily of sensory and intellectual response. The pictorial rationalization of death by means of traditional figures with their intimate summonses is replaced by a kind of blank nightmare lacking in all familiarity. What more can we know, other than the never-ending need to ask questions which cannot be answered? In an early *MS.* poem Larkin asks, "But what can the dead give?/ Such knowledge has no words: it comes before/ That second when life drops them, when they know/ The golden quality of things that live." In "Going" this final awareness of "things that live" is reduced to a futile search for the "tree . . . that locked/ Earth to sky."

In "Ambulances" (*WW*), "The Old Fools" and "The Building" (*HW*), the apprehension of death becomes more generalized and more readily located in a contemporary world, though the note of individual

desperation still sounds strongly in "The Old Fools". This poem acts, in a sense, as a sequel to "Dockery and Son" (*WW*), which ends: "Life is first boredom, then fear./ Whether or not we use it, it goes,/ And leaves what something hidden from us chose,/ And age, and then the only end of age." In a poem which compares and reflects upon the illusory choices made by the poet and a near contemporary at Oxford following their student days, the inevitable progression of life is seen as an experience which sharpens from "boredom" to "fear", and that fear is the growing sense of age and death, the final act not mentioned by name in "Dockery". Death *is* mentioned in the second stanza of "The Old Fools," one which encompasses brilliantly what Forster once called "the journey between two darknesses":

At death, you break up: the bits that were you  
Start speeding away from each other for ever  
With no one to see. It's only oblivion, true:  
We had it before, but then it was going to end,  
And was all the time merging with a unique endeavour  
To bring to bloom the million-petalled flower  
Of being here. Next time you can't pretend  
There'll be anything else.

The oblivion which descends in "Going" is here rationalized as a process which should be made less terrible when considered with the oblivion from which we journeyed at birth, but this parallel is seen to offer scant comfort; the second darkness is an epilogue not a prologue.

Larkin's fascination with the pace and detail of mortal extinction, as this stanza illustrates it, may have its origins in an undated poem from his notebook, one which follows closely upon an early draft of "Going". The first of two stanzas prefigures the second verse of "The Old Fools" with its attempt to pinpoint and tame the unknowable with carefully reasoned metaphors:

In death, the body that was strung with light,  
Goes out;  
The lamps, that fed on undiscovered oil  
Swing, break, and spill,  
Though a stiff soil that has no thirst  
Drinks all that's lost.<sup>12</sup>

The light is extinguished here as well; the same disintegration and scattering is described, though in slightly different figures. The sense of ending in the manuscript poem is somewhat qualified by the image of the

soil drinking the precious oil once it has been spilled. This does suggest renewal but the soil is "stiff" and "has no thirst"; the processes of renewal, exist though they may, seem mindless and mechanical and bring Hardy's bleak visions of the natural order to mind. In the end, in both poems, the attempt to affirm, to blunt death's victory, is centred in the language itself and the tone—the power of the imagination and language to create in the face of extinction. One gets the strong sense in "The Old Fools" of Larkin trying to keep his head above water, trying to find the most secure lifeline, and finding it in the very articulation of his fear.

Stanza one begins with a series of frightened questions, behind which lurks a mixture of disgust for those who are unfortunate enough to be old, and self-loathing for one whose fate this will also be. What appears most disturbing is the likely state of consciousness in old age; how differently is death envisioned when the faculties begin to weaken, when "you keep on pissing yourself" and you behave as if you were "crippled" or "tight"? How much does age and ageing block out from the mind? The process of disintegration which preoccupies Larkin in some of his earlier poems—what happens when you are actually *dying*?—is now enlarged to include senility and the total ageing process. How does one cope with the knowledge of death when one's own decay—"ash hair, toad hands, prune face dried into lines"—stares back day by day?

The second stanza, as we have seen, tries to grasp and elaborate upon a metaphysical apprehension of death and birth. The poem, in effect, begins again. Yet another starting point is evident in stanza three, where a calmer and more compassionate imagination seeks to describe the surviving private world of memory: "Perhaps being old is having lighted rooms/ Inside your head, and people in them, acting." The saving grace of old age, conjectures Larkin, is an ability to recreate the past and to live there, but this possibility is rendered doubtful by the qualification which is introduced, typically, in the transition from one stanza to the next:

That is where they live:  
Not here and now, but where all happened once.  
This is why they give

An air of baffled absence, trying to be there  
Yet being here.

The poem moves into its final phase now reluctantly sure of its direction, heading back to the fear which impressed itself in the first verse.

We return to the "old fools" after a brief lyric interlude in the rooms and among the furnishings of this much changed "daytime palace", with the occupants "setting down a lamp, smiling from a stair," and find them now ignominiously "crouching below/ Extinction's alp," unaware of the "peak" which we, and the poet, hold in view, and only conscious in their fading years of "rising ground". If the coming of old age means a decline of imagination and awareness does this decline represent a merciful release? How precious is the freedom to see, to know, and to be afraid; the freedom to write a poem like this? And so Larkin ends with a series of questions which worry their way around this central issue. There is also an ironic echo of the "stranger's" summons, but here the "strangers" do not come to lead away the victims but simply gather to say farewell, and are perhaps people they once knew but no longer recognize:

Can they never tell  
What is dragging them back, and how it will end?  
Not at night?  
Not when the strangers come? Never, throughout  
The whole hideous inverted childhood? Well,  
We shall find out.

That cryptic final sentence does not terminate this panicky debate, but merely suspends it for the time being. The poem stops itself just short of breakdown. The cool colloquial intrusion effects a dramatic shift and closes off the poem brilliantly, but it is not the shrugging calm of resignation—let us wait and see—but a clenched effort at self-control.

There is nothing of the "solving emptiness" ("Ambulances" *WW*) in this contemplation of death and how it may or may not be perceived by the very old and the senile. The poem stands out as Larkin's *cri de coeur* and carries with it an unusual hint of disorder. A far greater degree of objective design and control may be witnessed in "The Building", a poem which re-introduces some of Larkin's earlier visions of death and the almost religious preparations for it which have to be observed, but recasts the whole in a more familiar and recognizable peopled landscape: the "scruffy" porters, the "out-door clothes and half-filled shopping bags" of those in the hospital waiting room; "the short-terraced streets/ Where kids chalk games, and girls with hair-dos fetch/ Their separates from the cleaners,"<sup>13</sup> seen from the many windows of this "lucent comb". Despite these gritty local features the building itself (never actually named) has an other-worldly air about it; it already seems a half-way house for those who occupy it, almost a kind of purgatory,



while its modernity, size, anonymity, and efficient internal organization are anti-utopian in the manner of Huxley.<sup>14</sup> There is sufficient documentary detail to make us feel uncomfortably at home, but Larkin works simultaneously on another level of reality altogether. Patients and visitors alike—and we are never quite sure how to distinguish them—move like zombies “to their appointed levels” joining “The unseen congregations whose white rows/ Lie set apart above.” Twice, a beckoning nurse is seen to urge them on their way, the “angel” from “The Dedicated” in modern dress. Like the church in “Church Going” this “clean-sliced cliff” represents a “struggle to transcend/ The thought of dying,” though the hospital is the more thriving enterprise in this day, as the “locked church” down the road signifies. But that particular transcendence remains out of reach; any “hunger to be more serious” does not make that struggle any easier, whether we pay heed to the “priest” or the “doctor”, “in their long coats” (“Days” *WW*). The crowds which “each evening try/ With wasteful, weak, propitiatory flowers” echo the pathetic offerings of “loaves and wine” set before the stranger in Poem II (*NS*). Larkin has moved far in his poetry from those early conceptions of mortality but, in a sense, in the last lines of “The Building” he has come full circle.

### III

Larkin’s “preoccupation . . . with mortality” is both a specific and a generalized concern. The poems illustrated thus far show the specific interest in the “subject” of death, as an inevitable departure or process, as the mysterious experience of our second and final oblivion. Many of his other poems, as I have already indicated, discover the presence and spirit of death in the habits and routines of our ordinary daily lives. Our ways “Of building, benediction,/ Measuring love and money” are all “Ways of slow dying.” Life, as Larkin says in “Arrival”, impounds itself until it becomes a “style of dying only.”<sup>15</sup> Larkin’s awareness, for instance, of Mr. Bleaney’s straitened rituals in his rented room, with its “upright chair” and “sixty-watt bulb”; of the “seasonal decrease” (“Triple Time” *LD*) which our lengthening past reveals to us; of the “toad” that squats upon our backs, and of the choices we persuade ourselves we have made—these and other signs force the poet to identify so often that “stranger” as a being created by us, living within us, who, to paraphrase the sharp sadness of “Afternoons” (*WW*) pushes us to the side of our own lives. What makes death so difficult to prepare for, and certainly to transcend, is the absence of fulfillment in life, and the omnipresent shadow of failure.<sup>16</sup>

“Beyond the lamp stand failure and remorse,” says Larkin in “Vers de Societé” (*HW*), and in the second stanza of a manuscript poem entitled “To Failure” this same haunting presence is given sharper definition and strongly resembles the “Stranger who . . . / . . . asks admittance”:

It is these sunless afternoons, I find,  
 Install me at your elbow like a bore.  
 The chestnut trees are caked with silence. I'm  
 Aware the days pass quicker than before,  
 Are staler too: and once they fall behind  
 They look like ruin. You have been here some time.<sup>17</sup>

This is a familiar scene: the light is failing, nature is silent; time passes more quickly and offers no variety; habit sets in, and the past begins to show those “threadbare perspectives” (“Triple Time” *LD*). It is as if the two figures of Death and Failure support one another and are, in the end, interchangeable: the same figure but with different costumes for different occasions. “Slow dying”, a process wrought by failure, loss, disappointment, and habit, is no more than a rehearsal for that final extinction, that final failure—death itself.

The fear of death which seems so acute in “Going” and “The Old Fools” is only a recognition that in this secularized world we can only approach that blankness with the definition of self which comes from the relationship between who we are and what we can achieve. In an unpublished poem about Autumn and the decay of Nature’s year, drafted before the appearance of *The North Ship*, Larkin hints in one line at a predicament which is identifiable in his later work and especially so in *The Less Deceived*: “I am ashamed to face death with empty hands.”<sup>18</sup> There is a shadow of heroic endeavour in this confession, a remnant of a long dead faith in an ordered and coherent universe where death could indeed promise reward for virtue and effort—and success. In Poem XX in *The North Ship* the poet prays that he may keep the “image of a snow-white unicorn” and that it may descend and put into his hand “its golden horn”. But from the moment of Larkin’s conversion and commitment to the kind of poetry which exacts a “full look at the worst”, the reader is made consistently aware of empty hands; the “golden” horn seems never to be grasped.

Throughout *The Less Deceived* the weight and authority of those prescriptions italicised in “Vers de Societé” (*HW*)—“*All solitude is selfish*” and “*Virtue is social*”—is illustrated relentlessly. The poet dwells on separation, loss, and the sense of a life lived apart from the

lives, with all their *social*, sexual, and familial commitments and choices, of most other people. With this sense of difference comes guilt, unease, and self-consciousness. Though in poems like "Places, Loved Ones", "Reasons for Attendance", and "Poetry of Departure", the question of the selfishness of solitude and the virtue of the social or active life is debated with a certain brio, the confidence in that fundamental choice to remain "outside,/ Believing this" is always undercut. In detecting, with effective satire, the misjudgments and self-deceptions of others, Larkin moves toward a final reckoning with these same weaknesses; the lie he has exposed may be his own. This failure of engagement with social roles, including sexual participation, this absence of "proper ground" and "that special one/ Who has an instant claim/ On everything I own/ Down to my name" ("Places, Loved Ones"), sometimes ruefully acknowledged and sometimes with melancholy and a hint of bitterness, has, at this stage in his writing, only one clear compensation: "that lifted, rough-tongued bell/ (Art, if you like) whose individual sound/ Insists I too am individual." In "Reasons for Attendance" this bell contrasts with the "trumpet's voice, loud and authoritative" which calls him to the common "beat of happiness" to that social virtue and success. This is a rare mention of the autonomy of the artist, but it is more of a defensive measure than an outright claim.

*The Whitsun Weddings*, for the most part, carries over the habit of self-scrutiny from the second volume and re-echoes the mood of self-doubt. Poems like "Self's the Man", "Wild Oats", "Send No Money", and the more substantial "Dockery and Son" pursue the old debates and worry still about who might, after all, really be the less deceived. There is noticeable, however, a shift towards an awareness of a shared disillusionment, shared with people who made, perhaps, very different choices in their lives: the widow in "Love Songs in Age" who finds the promised solutions of "that much-mentioned brilliance, love" still somewhat in doubt; the "young mothers" in "Afternoons", their beauty thickening, being "pushed to the side of their own lives", the anonymous sick and injured in "Ambulances", "borne away in deadened air", and the "boy" and "pensioner" in "Essential Beauty" seduced and governed by those "infinitely debased forms of Platonic essence",<sup>19</sup> advertisements. Fulfilment, in its various personal and social forms, may indeed be a "desolate attic", but Larkin now seems to realize increasingly that desolation and disillusionment await us all no matter what paths we tread. The urgency of comparison—my life and the lives of others—seems to give way now to an interest in survival—how do we *all* cope, what measures may be taken? In moving from a

struggle to ascertain the inadequacies of self by setting up comparisons of choice in the lives of those around him to a more generalized curiosity in a common plight, Larkin is able to come to terms with a good deal of the habit of his own life, including the "toad work", re-appraised in "Toads Revisited". He is also, consequently, far less conscious of all the possible ramifications of social and personal failure. In the title poem he can look upon these Whitsuntide weddings with a compassionate interest and not become preoccupied with himself as the solitary traveller cut off from experience; there are no "reasons for attendance" given, no comparison suggested. And in the volume's last poem, "Arundel Tomb", he can address himself to the subject of death, his perceptions uncluttered by examples of life's "slow dying".

On a visit to Chichester Cathedral, Larkin found the stone effigies of the Earl and Countess of Arundel, rescuing their love from the claims of extinction, "extremely affecting".<sup>20</sup> In the poem he records the "sharp tender shock" at seeing the Earl's hand withdrawn from its gauntlet, "holding her hand". Admittedly this death has taken place across the centuries but something new is registered here in Larkin's response: it is his first poem about death which seeks to suggest the possibility of some form of meaningful survival. Larkin is careful to separate the dead couple from any awareness of their own "supine stationary voyage"; what matters is that countless survivors "through lengths and breadths/ Of time" have seen the effigy of their "faithfulness", and have borne witness to their love. In the final stanza Larkin is still circumspect and cautious, but what he finally concedes, in the context of his work to this date, is significant:

Time has transfigured them into  
Untruth. The stone fidelity  
They hardly meant has come to be  
Their final blazon, and to prove  
Our almost-instinct almost true:  
What will survive of us is love.

Two deaths in the distant past have been rendered something less than inexorable; a present-day observer can confirm that death has been cheated. A past love and a past death are translated in the final line into an assertion about the future, a belief in some kind of spiritual survival.

Larkin's most recent volume, *High Windows* (1974), as we have seen in our examination of "The Old Fools" and "The Building", is still illustrative of his "preoccupation with mortality" and his belief in the "inevitability of his own extinction", but the tendency suggested at the

conclusion of *The Whitsun Weddings*, this need to "transcend the thought of dying", this quest for means of survival, becomes more apparent. In "Sad Steps" Larkin chooses not to "shut out that moon", as did Hardy in the poem of that title, but contends with its timeless spiritual symbolism and is finally not just reminded of his own lost youth and impending death, but of the continuing reality of youth and love "for others undiminished somewhere". The power, energy, and mystery of the heavens figure again in "Solar" which ends with an assertion of eternity: "Our needs hourly/ Climb and return like angels./ Unclosing like a hand,/ You give for ever." In "Livings II" the elemental mastery of the sea adds another dimension to Larkin's "unfenced existence". In "Livings III" we move from the close intimacy of an Oxford refectory to the sparkling "Chaldean constellations" above the roofs of the town. There is a discernible movement outward and upward in some of these poems, including the title piece which, in its last lines, as one critic has suggested, escapes "suddenly and involuntarily from an oppressive sense of bafflement at human sexuality to what might almost be called a vision of pure spirit":<sup>21</sup>

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.

As "To the Sea" and "Show Saturday" attempt to add meaning to our random, inconsequential and terminate lives by stressing the value of family and social rituals, by encouraging a commitment to continuity in the face of the knowledge of death, so "Sad Stops", "Solar", "Livings II" and "III", and "High Windows" itself, lead us away from that daily round and suggest even more meaningful levels of continuation and survival. The last poem in the volume, like "Arundel Tomb" in *The Whitsun Weddings*, returns us to Larkin's abiding subject and the theme of this investigation. As with "Arundel Tomb" Larkin registers the same faith in spiritual survival, but here the affirmation is stronger if not complete. "The Explosion" recounts a mining disaster whose victims "in beards and moleskins,/ Fathers, brothers, nicknames, laughter," pass before us on the way to their work "on the day of the explosion". One of the men finds "a nest of lark's eggs" and hides them in the grass for his return down that same lane at the end of the day. But at midday "there came a tremor"; the sun which in the opening stanza had seemed to contain the sleeping slagheap as the fateful day dawned, now "scarfed

as in a heat-haze, dimmed." The poem's narrative is interrupted in the sixth stanza, and a voice from the scriptures places the reader in a chapel funeral service: "*The dead go on before us, they/ Are sitting in God's house in comfort,/ We shall see them face to face—*". This is the first time we have found ourselves in a place of worship since "Church Going" (*LD*), and both the place and the mood are much changed. The faith and the vision of the dead miners' wives is not questioned; the mystical proof of survival, a survival which has its source in love, is presented uncritically:

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

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

One showing the eggs unbroken.

The mysterious solar authority which makes its presence felt at the beginning of the poem, though "dimmed" at the moment of disaster reasserts itself as the source of life at the end of the poem. That gold coin brilliantly subsumes the awkward dichotomy of silver and copper from that early manuscript fragment; life is not pitted against death, there are no separate coins. There is almost a sense of Yeats' "tragic joy" in this conclusion, but made intimate and accessible in the final line. It is ironic that Larkin's long-favoured use of the diminishing "un-" prefix should here posit faith and affirmation. The dead miner does not face death "with empty hands."

#### IV

For in the word death  
There is nothing to grasp; nothing to catch or claim  
(MS. poem, dated 14 Sept., 1946)<sup>22</sup>

Despite this early capitulation to what seems the blankest of enigmas, Larkin has throughout his career as a poet refused to back away from exploration of this "word", and his attempts to "grasp" the word and the idea have lent force and direction to a major part of his work. To concentrate on this quest for the unknowable is to illuminate the problem of divided poetic self with which my introduction was concerned. To

view Larkin's *oeuvre* to date it would probably be fair to say that the definition of the poet as a modern anti-hero governed by a sense of his own mortality seems the more justified.<sup>23</sup> But, beginning with some early signs in *The Whitsun Weddings*, and considerably more evidence in *High Windows*, a sense of vision and a quiet voice of celebration seem to be asserting themselves. This is not a return to the Yeatsian imitations of *The North Ship*, but something new and earned. The poet as *homo religiosus* is a definition which appears to have some legitimacy but it remains to be confirmed in Larkin's future work.<sup>24</sup>

## NOTES

1. British Library, Add. MS. 52619. This poem is one hundred and five lines in length and may be found on pp. 53-55 in the unpublished notebook. All quotations from this source are reproduced with the kind permission of Philip Larkin.
2. "The other Larkin," *Critical Quarterly* (Winter 1975), p. 360 and p. 352. Professor Watson interprets Larkin's work with the aid of Mircea Eliade's *The Sacred and the Profane*.
3. All quotations from Larkin's published verse are taken from the following editions: *The North Ship* (1945; rpt. London: Faber, 1966); *The Less Deceived* (Hessle, Yorkshire: The Marvell Press, 1955); *The Whitsun Weddings* (London: Faber, 1964); and *High Windows* (London: Faber, 1974). Where citations are made in the body of this essay the abbreviations, *NS*, *LD*, *WW*, and *HW* will be used.
4. "The Unsung Gold Medallist: Portrait of a Poet," *Sunday Times Magazine* (March 27, 1966), p. 63. Larkin was awarded the Queen's Medal for Poetry in 1966.
5. Coleridge's term, from *Biographia Literaria* (Book VI) is usefully employed by Tom Paulin in his discussion of Hardy's poetic imagination. See *Thomas Hardy: The Poetry of Perception* (London: Macmillan, 1975), p. 36.
6. C.B. Cox, "Philip Larkin, Anti-Heroic Poet," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* (Spring 1976), p. 168.
7. In *The Uncommon Poet for the Common Man: A Study of Philip Larkin's Poetry* (The Hague: Mouton, 1974), p. 57. Lolette Kuby comments: "The fatality, death, in Hardy's and Larkin's view, merely terminates life which is at every moment the fatality of every moment, a journey down "Cemetery Road." With the exception of "Arundel Tomb," Larkin's poems do not treat of the already dead, the *fait accompli*, the thread cut, but as life as a way of dying, a repeated fraying of the thread."
8. Add. MS. 52619, p. 44.
9. Add. MS. 52619, pp. 56-60.
10. *XX Poems* (The Author: Queen's College, Belfast, 1951). There is no pagination.
11. Add. MS. 52619, p. 27. From a poem dated 23.8.45.
12. Add. MS. 52619, p. 39.
13. The double solidus indicates a stanza break as well as a line break in this and one following quotation from "The Building."
14. One reviewer, Clive James, found it Dantesque, and especially reminiscent of *Inferno V*. See "Wolves of Memory," *Encounter* (June 1974), p. 69.
15. "Arrival," *XX Poems*.
16. Geoffrey Thurley identifies "failure" as the "great theme of all Larkin's work," in *The Ironic Harvest: English Poetry in the Twentieth Century* (London: Arnold, 1974), p. 147. Philip Gardner also identifies failure as one of four universal themes in Larkin's verse, the other three being "time," "love," and "death." Consult "The Wintry Drum: The Poetry of Philip Larkin," *Dalhousie Review* (Spring 1968), p. 90.

17. Add. MS. 52619, p. 79. The poem is dated 18.5.49.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 2. The poem is dated 6.10.44.
19. This is Larkin's own commentary, to be found on Listen Records, LPV6, *The Whitsun Weddings*, 1965. David Timms cites this poem and "Love Songs in Age" as indicative of a "compassion for people quite different from himself," more evident in this volume than ever before. *Philip Larkin* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1973), p. 95-6.
20. *The Whitsun Weddings*. Listen Records, LPV6.
21. Martin Schofield, "The Poetry of Philip Larkin," *Massachusetts Review* (Summer 1976), p. 388.
22. See note 8.
23. Clive James, in his *Encounter* review insists that Larkin is the "poet of the void." Similarly, Richard Murphy, in his review of *High Windows*, finds "oblivion nearer than ever." See "The Art of Debunkery," *New York Review of Books* (May 15, 1975), p. 30. Larkin's most recent poem, "Aubade" (*TLS*, Dec. 23, 1977), appeared too late to be considered here, but its bleak recognition of "unresting death" certainly lends itself to these interpretations.
24. Without employing Professor Watson's methodology, Alan Brownjohn, reviewing *High Windows*, also responds to something new. There is a "turning aside . . . from the soiled territory of living" to the "areas of chaste emptiness" exemplified in the volume's title piece. But the question remains for Brownjohn: "Is Larkin's an art which can be seen to enhance life . . . . Or is the deep blue air going to seem, increasingly, a solipsistic escape for a shy, conservative temperament?" "The Deep Blue Air," *New Statesman* (June 14, 1974), p. 854.