

# *Creative Embarrassment: Philip Larkin's Dramatic Monologues*

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WHENEVER THAT PECULIARLY English emotion embarrassment has surfaced in the writing of such major poets as Wordsworth, Keats, Tennyson, Browning, or Hardy, or alternatively, whenever these poets have been detected striving to distance themselves from embarrassment, critics have found themselves at a loss for an appropriate response. Regarding it as an inartistic intrusion, they have failed to appreciate the potential of embarrassment as a fulcrum for poetic creativity.<sup>1</sup> Although, as one might expect, it is rather more in evidence in the Romantic and Victorian poets, its presence is also felt in contemporary verse, and it is particularly significant in the work of that very English poet, Philip Larkin. Larkin is highly sensitive to embarrassment both in life and in art. He makes embarrassment about his own past the subject of such poems as "Annus Mirabilis,"<sup>2</sup> which records his tardy sexual initiation, or "I Remember, I Remember," a parody of the Lawrentian autobiographical poem, in which Larkin details a childhood where nothing at all remarkable happened. And he frequently finds his poetry itself the source of some embarrassment: "I always think that the poems I write are very much more naive — very much more emotional — almost embarrassing so — than a lot of other people's. When I was tagged as unemotional, it used to mystify me; I used to find it quite shaming to read some of the things I'd written."<sup>3</sup>

Larkin is also greatly embarrassed and frustrated by the gulf that exists between his status as a poet (and university librarian) and that of his preferred audience, the general reader, for in Larkin's view: "If a poet loses his pleasure-seeking audience, he has lost the only audience worth having, for which the dutiful mob

that signs on every September is no substitute"<sup>4</sup> — a remark which implies that Larkin has turned his back on the elite audience cultivated by the Modernists. The reason lies partly in his unswerving commitment to recording and communicating the truth of daily experience: "I write poems to preserve things that I have seen/thought/felt (if I may so indicate a composite and complex experience) both for myself and for others."<sup>6</sup> He wants to offer his readers fresh insights into the nature of that experience — "to feel yes, I've never thought of it that way, but that's how it is."<sup>6</sup> For Larkin uniquely, it is embarrassment that provides the creative tension between the poet, the reader and reality and he employs it to overcome the intellectual and social barriers that inhibit communication with the wider audience for whom he writes. His poetry, he says, is "born of the tension between what [the poet] non-verbally feels and what can be got over in common word-usage to someone who hasn't had his experience or education or travel-grant."<sup>7</sup> What Larkin often feels is simply profound embarrassment, and his response to its creative potential is complex and varied. There are many poems in which it is treated as a subject valuable in its own right, for instance "Ambulances," in which Larkin refuses to flinch from our awkwardness of response to other people's illnesses, or "The Old Fools," in which he registers our shame-faced disgust at the horrors of old age; while a poem like "Church Going" employs the potency of embarrassment as an avenue to a deeper understanding of experience. And in poems such as "Wedding-Wind" and "Livings" the distracting embarrassment involved in the exposure of Larkin's own identity is overcome by his use of individualized personas to explore profounder areas of imaginative sympathy.

Like joy and grief, embarrassment is fundamentally a levelling emotion, and in their shared experience of embarrassment the poet and the reader stand on common ground. There is a moral dimension involved as well, for if the poet, or his persona, registers embarrassment, then they give clear evidence of their moral sensibility and their trustworthiness (this, after all, is the psychological and moral basis of a poem like Browning's "Fra Lippo Lippi"). And through sharing the persona's embarrassment the reader's own humanity is opened to moral impressions. The poetic

form which offers itself as a natural vehicle for such a creative use of embarrassment is the dramatic monologue. Speaking about "Church Going" Larkin indicates his interest in a form which he finds both versatile and congenial, when he says: "I think one has to dramatise oneself a little."<sup>8</sup> Of course in Browning's hands the dramatic monologue developed into a very sophisticated form, which includes a first-person speaker whose character is unwillingly revealed, an auditor whose influence is felt throughout the poem, a specific time and place for the action, the use of colloquial language, some sympathetic involvement with the speaker and an ironic discrepancy between the speaker's view of himself and the larger judgment implied by the poet. And Larkin also employs several of these strategies, because for him, as for Browning, the scrutiny of quotidian reality is a strenuous and complex endeavour, sometimes requiring the poet to explore his feelings through a character very different from his own, and at other times demanding a figure, frequently embarrassed by the situation in which he finds himself, with whom the reader can identify, and who can occasionally be very close to the poet himself. Larkin thus facilitates the reader's search for values by dramatizing experience — paradoxically by creating a fiction — for the dramatic monologue enacts its values in a special way. And because of its quality of feint, of distance and objectivity, Larkin is enabled to extend what many critics have regarded as his "normal" range to include, for instance, poems of bitter satire and of lyrical ecstasy.

Larkin's creation of a persona enables him to overcome the problem of embarrassment that might inhibit or even perhaps silence the poet. At the same time this strategy, as in "Wedding-Wind," for instance, from *The Less Deceived*, introduces the reader to new modes of experience, for essentially the dramatic monologue is a means by which the thought of the poem is given peculiar force by being proposed from the point of view of a speaker for whom it has a special significance. "Wedding-Wind" is a celebration of love by a young woman on the occasion of her marriage, and throughout the poem, which maintains a sustained lyricism, the wind symbolizes the inspirational force that has taken over her life: "The wind blew all my wedding-day, /

And my wedding-night was the night of the high wind." Of course the speaker is a fiction, as far removed as possible from the poet himself, and some critics have found the poem not quite convincing for this very reason.<sup>9</sup> But this is to misunderstand the poem's strategy. We experience the young woman as a character in her own right because, in addition to the physical details of the farmyard and the stormy night, which provide circumstantial evidence to support the fiction, Larkin goes to some lengths to establish in the speaker obvious characteristics that he himself does not possess. Her flat, conversational tones introduce her as an ordinary woman, who chooses for the expression of the wind bodying forth her joy the appropriately feminine image of the unity given to beads by the thread that connects them. All this gives validity to her sense of intoxication. When the man is absent for a few moments she feels "Stupid in candlelight, hearing rain, / Seeing my face in the twisted candlestick, / Yet seeing nothing." And in the morning, when he has gone to look at the flood, she sets down her pail and stares at the sky and the wind. Her new experience of the power of love makes her wish to involve the whole universe in her happiness as she submits to a force much greater than herself. Although the two halves of the poem divide into night and day, the worlds of love and work, all the woman's actions are underwritten by her sense of the special significance of the wind and the dawning. Her bed is now shared by "perpetual morning" and, although he is away from her, as the agent of this eternal dawn the man is the focus of the woman's thoughts, thus providing a strong connection between them until they are brought together in the last lines.

In "Wedding-Wind" the dramatic monologue allows Larkin the emotional freedom to explore a romantic, Lawrentian universe; one which includes a profound sense of sexual fulfilment and joy, the excitement of wind and floods, the presence of horses and chickens; a world which is also evoked in the rich biblical cadence of the concluding lines: "Can even death dry up / These new delighted lakes, conclude / Our kneeling as cattle by all-generous waters?" This imagery suggests the creation of a new but immutable experience. However, it is also framed as a question by the woman, who seeks some confirmation of the

validity and permanence of her joy. More importantly, it is voiced in a language more appropriate to the poet. What we experience here is a divided consciousness. We feel the presence of the speaker and are drawn to her point of view, but we are also aware that she is a dramatic creation and that other perspectives exist, because Larkin has quietly intercalated them into the poem from the beginning. The man has his alternative commitment to the world of work, the horses are nervous, the woman fails to register the ominous quality of her distorted face in the candlestick, and in the second stanza the wind is still a realistically threatening force "hunting" and "thrashing," while the storm has created floods. In conclusion the ultimate limitation of the woman's happiness is mentioned, death. And it is at this point that her voice merges into that of the poet. Apart from the intrinsic pleasure that this perception of dual perspectives affords the reader, more importantly it serves to place the individual in a wider context so that the significance of her thoughts is modified by our larger consciousness of the existence of a more arduous and painful world. Larkin does not seek to invalidate the woman's joy; rather, he insists gently and with compassion on a broader view of the truth.

More recently, in *High Windows*, Larkin has exploited the liberation from his own life and voice afforded by the dramatic monologue, in order to explore the frame of values inherent in alternative lives, in a fascinating triptych entitled "Livings." In each poem a different speaker creates a composite image of his own way of living, which is allowed to comment on the others by juxtaposition. The first poem develops the persona of a small businessman who deals with farmers. The speaker's character is the sum of his routine, and the stale round of his life is neatly captured in the newspaper he is reading, in which the profound and the trivial are yoked in a meaningless way: "Births, deaths. For sale. Police court. Motor spares." His equally random connection with the regular hotel guests is quietly emphasized by the way the newspaper items are echoed by the hotel guest list in the opening of the second stanza: "Clough, / Margetts, the Captain, Dr. Watterson." Punctuated by empty social rituals like standing rounds at the bar, the speaker's life is lonely and purposeless, and

his mood is underlined by images of vacuity as the smoke "hangs under the light." Even his description of the beautiful sunset is couched in flat, dull tones, which register his numbness of response, while a sense of tremendous loss is also suggested by the image in the final stanza as the "big sky," like his life, "Drains down the estuary like the bed / Of a gold river."

The revelation that the date is 1929, which is held over until the very end of the poem, creates an iron reflection on the speaker's earlier comments and tells us more about his character than his laconic speech suggests that he is willing to reveal. There is a subdued bitterness in his observations of the hotel decor: "The pictures on / The walls are comic — hunting, the trenches, stuff / Nobody minds or notices." The jarring juxtaposition of "hunting" and "the trenches," the worlds of the shires and the battlefields, and the recognition of the irrelevance of both to the post-war age, summarizes the speaker's disillusion. The rituals appropriate to the world of his father, whose business he has inherited, are no longer pertinent. History has moved on and left him stranded, as he finally realizes: "It's time for change, in nineteen twenty-nine."

The second poem records the exhilaration of a lighthouse-keeper during a stormy night. Far from envying the attractions of the land, where ports are "wind-shuttered" and fleets are "pent like hounds," where there is the warmth of "fires in humped inns / Kippering sea-pictures" — a world which, as the imagery suggests, is secure, confined, even domesticated — the speaker feels at one with the weather and the sea. He is enveloped by an animate universe — the sea "explodes upwards, / Relapsing, to slaver / Off landing-stage steps," and "Rocks writhe back to sight. / Mussels, limpets, / Husband their tenacity / In the freezing slither." And there is the beautifully sensuous, transfiguring image of the whirling snow like a delicate cloud of moths around the lamp on a summer night. The speaker experiences a profound sense of joyful communion, which is emphasized by the concluding lines of the first two stanzas: "Running suds, rejoice!", "Creatures, I cherish you!" as he luxuriates in the power and activity of the natural world, and in its reciprocal relation with his own imagination. Indeed, the keeper's whole universe is

governed by the intensity of his imagination as it feeds upon its own isolation: "Radio rubs its legs, / Telling me of elsewhere." As his reference to divining-cards implies, he is a man reduced to fundamentals, profoundly in touch with the primitive elements both in the world and within himself. Glad to be isolated in nature, he feels himself to be "guarded by brilliance," and he experiences an almost mystical calm amidst the frenzy of the storm. Initially this state of mind seems to the reader to indicate a kind of madness, except that for the speaker — whose point of view carries overwhelming conviction by the end of the poem — it is clearly the social world that is insane, as "Lit shelved liners / Grope like mad worlds westward."

In the final poem of the triptych Larkin creates a third persona, but this time one drawn from the sphere of the poet's own experience. A young college don describes the events of an evening spent dining in college when, because of the Master's absence, there is greater than usual consumption of wine and a freer flow of conversation. It is, however, an empty ritual, not unlike that of the first poem, but here marked by displays of ponderous wit and ill-temper that overlie a deeper sense of futility than even the gathering at the commercial hotel. As in the first poem, we are made aware of the background presence of the social community, represented by the Master, the sizar and the butler, but again there is a lack of real communion. The desperate quality of the brittle wit is stressed by the alliteration of "Oath-enforced assertions fly / On rheumy fevers, resurrection, / Regicide and rabbit pie," and this reductive effect is enhanced throughout the poem by the rhythmic tetrameters, the jingle being emphasized by the regular alternation of masculine and feminine rhymes. Employing the young academic's sardonic point of view, Larkin satirizes the futile conversation and the way the values of scholarship and religious faith are alike consigned to the college studies where "Dusty shelves hold prayers and proofs." Here the passing of time is the concern only of the college clocks, and even death is trivialized by the negligent reference to the college cat making a kill.

As in the earlier poems, images of inside and outside are important in developing the poem's full human context and proper

scale, giving at the same time a sense of warmth and security and also an intense awareness of human littleness and frailty. The first is achieved by the young don's description of the piling of logs on the fire; the second by his rather academic reference to the sky where "Above, Chaldean constellations / Sparkle over crowded roofs." We feel not only the distance and coldness of the natural world, but also the speaker's refined, aesthetic response to it. It is perceived as beautiful but inhospitable and it is employed to register his basic impulse, which is one of retreat; not merely the comic escape from the constraints imposed by the authority of the Master, which is the speaker's subject, but in truth a more sombre and profound withdrawal from the natural world, from time and death, from humane studies, and from the values of religion, which are trivialized and effectively excluded.

In "Livings" Larkin examines the values associated with these three ways of living, displaying in the process an acute historical and geographical imagination, an ability to create credible psychological figures, and great moral sympathy. He probes various moral and social values in different periods and places (one of them close to his own life, one within the realm of his social experience, and one remote from both), and in doing so he expands the reader's understanding of the variety and complexity of ordinary lived experience. Moreover, by framing the central poem of exuberant energy and lyrical splendour with two that record defeat and disillusion, he is concerned to affirm the profounder values of solitude and communion with the natural world, which produces a sense of wholeness within the self. The dramatic monologue frees Larkin from the cramping, inhibiting embarrassment of his historical, social identity to explore facets of a deeper self, which contains alternative, undeveloped lives.

One of Larkin's most successful dramatic monologues is "Church Going," from *The Less Deceived*, which involves one of his most sophisticated uses of the persona, in this case an awkward, embarrassed figure with whom the reader can readily identify. John Press recognizes that the speaker in the poem is fictional, but he finds it impossible to believe in the character because his clumsy references to the church's "holy end" are incompatible with his esoteric knowledge of rood-lofts and pyx.



Moreover, Press wonders how the awkward man figured at the opening of the poem could articulate the weighty perforation of the magnificent final stanza.<sup>10</sup> However, as the last stanza itself indicates, the poem is about the need to "grow wise," and its development is fundamentally concerned with revealing a growth in wisdom achieved not by visiting one church, but through the habit of church going itself.

The speaker at the beginning of the poem is essentially the reader's representative. As most of us have done at some time or other, he mounts the lectern only to feel embarrassed and baffled. But by the conclusion of the poem the speaker has effectively attained, through reflection, the wisdom evinced by the poet. The reader thus gradually adopts a perspective larger than that of the persona with whom he has been identifying, and which the poet finally confirms in his own authoritative voice. This method confers on the poem a more precise and subtle inner form than its overt structure of situation, reflection and statement would suggest. The monologue exists both as the vehicle for Larkin's opinions and for the development of the experience which informs those views and gives them validity, a process in which embarrassment has a significant part to play. In "Church Going" Larkin presents the movement from a divided to a unified consciousness; that is, from our sense of a gulf between the poet and the persona he has created (for whom churches are bewildering, embarrassing and meaningless) to a point at which the accumulated experience of the speaker, the reader and the poet finally coincide in the concluding coherent statement.

Larkin dramatizes the shifts in the speaker's mind by variations in tone which record significant fluctuations of emotion. We learn a good deal about the fictional speaker from detail, for instance from the embarrassed joke about the silence "Brewed God knows how long," which goes with the removal of his cycle-clips and his casual assessment of the contents of the church. He is clearly unsatisfied, and he uses the paraphernalia of the building to explore its possible significance for him. His attempt to parody the vicar or lay reader is a gesture towards understanding, but the "unignorable silence" makes mere speech seem vain and silly. Moreover, the "Hectoring large-scale verses" that he reads

contrast strongly with the eloquent peroration at the close of the poem, which offers less assurance, but has the compelling air of truth. The "Here endeth" which the speaker announces to the church's sniggering echoes is ambiguous. It marks the conclusion of his futile efforts to comprehend the meaning of the place, but it also signifies the collapse of the church and the demise of faith, which are developed in the succeeding stanzas, so that by the end of the poem the speaker's parody of church ritual has assumed a much wider meaning.

As he goes on to speculate on what will happen when the churches fall out of use, the speaker begins to understand something of their function in human life. At first his mood remains jocular to cover his embarrassment, as for example in the alliteration of "parchment, plate and pyx," but the gradual change to a mood of nervous apprehension is indicated by his use of archaisms. He presents a very literal picture of the church in decay, and the other figures in the poem — the "dubious women," the "ruin-bibber, randy for antique," people whose simple superstitions or superficial cultural appetites will miss the significance of the place, and his future "representative," ignorant and bored — are all used to define for himself the function and meaning of the church.

The wisdom that the speaker gains from church going is the knowledge that the church is the source of "Power of some sort or other," not because of its impressive interior, for he has "no idea / What this accoutred frowsty barn is worth," but because it symbolizes the fundamental needs of the human spirit. The roots of culture lie in the immemorial rituals associated with birth, marriage and death which have been celebrated on this spot, and it is for this reason he says, "It pleases me to stand in silence here." The conclusion of the poem is controlled by the poet's own voice, and the contrast between the poet and his representative in the future, who will lack his opportunity to acquire wisdom, releases its final, elevated, sonorous statement of affirmation. The casual, colloquial speech patterns of the earlier speaker are gradually abandoned in favour of the rhetorical and the lyrical: "A serious house on serious earth it is, / In whose blent air all our compulsions meet, / Are recognised, and robbed as

destinies." The church, he concludes, is a symbol of the unity and sanctity of all these events, and even if all church buildings fall into ruin people will still gravitate towards them because of an insatiable hunger for what they represent.

It is clear from a poem like "Church Going," which deals directly and honestly with some of the profounder experiences of daily living, that Larkin has no time for narcissistic poetry of the kind that concerns itself with the problems of writing, or which draws on a fund of special poetic myths — a "myth-kitty" as Larkin has termed it — in order to buttress its significance.<sup>11</sup> This represents one aspect of his embarrassment at the gulf that exists between contemporary poetry and the reading public. In "A Study of Reading Habits," from *The Whitsun Weddings*, this embarrassment is the main pulse behind Larkin's probing analysis of the wider issues implicit in the different ways that reading impinges on the lives of ordinary people. As the poem's title indicates, reading is a socially acquired habit, which embodies society's values. The speaker records how it ministered to his boyhood need to identify with hero figures, and how in adolescence it fed his sexual imagination, but now that he has reached middle age he has to admit that he can no longer identify with supermen, but with the brutal sexuality of the villains of his earlier fantasies. Instead he sees himself as the unreliable dude who lets the girl down before the hero arrives, or as the cowardly storekeeper. For him, as for many people, reading has simply provided an escape from reality; it "Cured most things short of school." Now he no longer reads much because of his painfully acquired knowledge of the real relation between fiction and life. Reading has let him down because among the stereotypes that fiction offers there are also the failures and the cowards — the ordinary man written larger than life — and this tardy but inescapable identification is simply too much to bear.

The character of the speaker is developed by playing off his colloquial language against the language of the literature that he recalls reading as a boy, when he dealt out "the old right hook / To dirty dogs twice my size" and as an adolescent: "The women I clubbed with sex! / I broke them up like meringues." Larkin captures exactly his tone of nostalgic reminiscence, his breathless

sexual excitement, his laconic admission of failure, and his final explosive imprecation: "Get stewed: / Books are a load of crap." This is not, as one or two critics have suggested, Larkin adopting an anti-intellectual stance. Rather, our awareness that the controlling consciousness in the poem is that of a poet-librarian releases, together with the sympathy that the speaker's revelation demands, its basically comic, anarchic impulse. But it is also a serious poem. In the dramatic monologue sympathetic speakers such as this are often designed to arouse our concern for the oppressed or disadvantaged. In this poem Larkin shows considerable insight into the kinds of claim that the ordinary reader is taught to make upon fiction, and he raises important questions (as the title implies, this is a "study") about the nature and function of literature in our society.

Embarrassment is an emotion very close to indignation, and in a satiric poem like "Naturally the Foundation Will Bear Your Expenses," from *The Whitsun Weddings*, Larkin manages both to mask his embarrassment and give vent to his moral indignation through the employment of a very different persona. It is a comic poem, but it is also, as Larkin has pointed out, "as serious as anything I have written."<sup>12</sup> It concerns a young English academic who is on his way to India to deliver a lecture that he has already given at Berkeley, and which he intends to read on the BBC, before developing it into a book for Chatto and Windus. He epitomizes the modern, ambitious academic, who peddles his work to further his career.

The fiction of the poem is built up by precise reference. The young man is indulging in reflections aboard his Comet during a flight from London to Bombay on Armistice Day:

Crowds, colourless and careworn,  
 Had made my taxi late,  
 Yet not till I was airborne  
 Did I recall the date —  
 That day when Queen and Minister  
 And Band of Guards and all  
 Still act their solemn-sinister  
 Wreath-rubbish in Whitehall.

Devoid of compassion for the families of the war dead, he feels

only irritation with the crowds who have delayed him. That these attitudes are not shared by Larkin is evidenced by his profound feelings about the terrible changes wrought in people's lives by the First World War in "MCMXIV." In "Naturally the Foundation Will Bear Your Expenses" Larkin chooses to promote his own point of view by encouraging the reader to react against the speaker, who is condemned out of his own mouth. Larkin thus provides for the academic a recognizably personal language composed of bitingly contemptuous, rather adolescent wit. He evinces a supercilious attitude to simple, powerful emotions, such as patriotism, and his system of values is readily identified as including physical ease, wealth, fame and second-hand contact through his "pal" with famous literary figures like "Morgan Forster." Egocentric, smug and callous, he has reneged on those values traditionally associated with scholarship and humane studies: passion for truth, reverence for the past, and love of humanity.

Embarrassment and indignation also control the form of a similar but more complex dramatic monologue, "Posterity," from *High Windows*, in which Larkin satirizes the perverted values of a young American university teacher, who is desperate to obtain tenure by finishing his Ph.D. thesis, or publishing a book. This is both a subtler and more humorous poem because Larkin, with a fine sense of the absurd, immediately introduces himself: "Jake Balokowsky, my biographer, / Has this page microfilmed." This at once sets up a tension between the persona, the poet and the reader. While, on the one hand this device angles the monologue towards fiction, establishing the autonomy of the speaker's world, on the other it undercuts our sense of the truth of the fiction by alerting us early to the controlling presence of the poet. Tension is further heightened by a combination within the reader of a growing antagonism towards the speaker, together with a simultaneous sense of acute embarrassment as we are forced to eavesdrop on his judgment of the poet, whose company we share.

The pun in the academic's name, and the comic futility of his having microfilmed a page that is still in print (or even, perhaps, is still being written!) encapsulates Larkin's opinion of him. He is another bogus scholar, interested in research only in so far as it provides him with material security. Larkin establishes the fic-

tional reality of his speaker in his own often coarse language: “‘It’s stinking dead, the research line; / Just let me put this bastard on the skids, / I’ll get a couple of semesters leave / To work on Protest Theatre.’” Ironically he perverts those very values that his chosen profession represents. Far from writing a biography of a poet whom he understands and admires, he is working on a man he despises for his boring life and old-fashioned beliefs: “‘What’s he like? / Christ, I just told you. Oh, you know the thing, / That crummy textbook stuff from freshman Psych, / Not out of kicks or something happening — / One of those old-type, *natural* fouled-up guys.’” Larkin’s marvellous ear for idiom and speech rhythms captures the young man’s boredom and irritation, for at the back of his mind are the ever-present claims of his wife, his parents-in-law, and the children. However, although he is arrogant, greedy and indifferent to both literary and human values, his judgment of the poet is allowed to make a neat counterpoint to the poet’s oblique judgment of him. Larkin does not merely permit the speaker to condemn himself, but he also employs his alien point of view to place the poet’s own writing in a wider perspective. For all its ignorance and venom, the academic’s description of the poet implies that there are significant limitations in his poetry. Except that — and this is the central irony in Larkin’s elaborate joke — we have the poem itself. The reader is left to judge from this serious yet witty, satirical poem just how “old-type” and “fouled-up” the poet is, and which of the two, the poet or his biographer, comes off worse. By using the form of the dramatic monologue to gain distance, and by utilizing the reader’s own embarrassment, Larkin deals tactfully and humorously with the difficult and embarrassing task of facing the incomprehension and negative judgment of some of his critics.

There are several dramatic monologues among Larkin’s writing to date in which the persona is much closer to the poet’s own voice because, while the subject of these poems requires a certain degree of distance and detachment, the tension of embarrassment, though it remains an important force, is modified by the seriousness of the poems’ themes. In “Reasons for Attendance,” for instance, from *The Less Deceived*, Larkin creates the persona

of an academic librarian, thus presenting a slant view of his opinions from an area of experience that derives from his professional role. The speaker has been invited to a student dance. He feels uneasy and employs his dry wit to intellectualize his situation and keep emotion safely at bay. He denies that he is lured to the window of the dance hall by anything other than the sound of the trumpet: "that lifted, rough-tongued bell / (Art if you like)," and certainly not by the "maul to and fro" of the dancers. The call of the trumpet and the sight of the couples dancing lead the speaker to speculate rather pompously about the nature of happiness. Just as art, in this case the individual note of the trumpet, seems to insist on the speaker's individuality, so too he feels that happiness is to be found in solitude rather than in couples. However, the speaker unwillingly betrays his true feelings when he talks lasciviously about the "wonderful feel of girls," and when he protests complacently about the "sheer / Inaccuracy" of believing that "the lion's share / Of happiness is found by couples." His strident insistence that happiness resides in art and solitude rather than in life and sexuality conceals a very real fear of loneliness, and of having missed the secret of happiness altogether. Nevertheless, the speaker is well aware of the defensive game he is playing. This is signalled to the reader in the smug jingle of the parallelism in the final stanza: "Therefore I stay outside, / Believing this; and they maul to and fro, / Believing that; and both are satisfied"; at which point the speaker feels compelled to drop his mask and add with wry bitterness, "If no one has misjudged himself. Or lied." The effectiveness of the poem clearly depends on the use of a formal mask which is nevertheless quite close to the poet's self, on the tension between the confessional impulse and the embarrassed, defensive posture, on the subtle modulations of tone, and on the ruthless honesty with which Larkin turns the irony devastatingly upon himself.

Larkin's gift for dramatizing the workings of his speakers' minds is perhaps best exemplified in "Dockery and Son," from *The Whitsun Weddings*, in which the persona is very close to the situation of the poet himself, but in which the identification is not made embarrassingly explicit in order to give full play to the flux

and reflux of the speaker's mind. The eight line stanza and simple rhyme scheme permit shifts of tone and modulations of thought and feeling as he reflects on his visit to his former college, where he has discovered with a shock how differently from his own the lives of his contemporaries have developed. The most forceful contrast is between his own childless, solitary existence and that of Dockery, whose son is now in college: "Dockery, now; / Only nineteen, he must have taken stock / Of what he wanted, and been capable / Of . . . No, that's not the difference: rather, how / Convinced he was he should be added to!" The poem moves through the speaker's consideration of the "ranged / Joining and parting lines" in the moonlight at Sheffield station, which create a metaphor for his life and those of his fellow students like Dockery, and Larkin conveys exactly the play of his mind as it gropes towards its bleak statement, which is delivered in the final stanza, where the regularity of the iambic pentameter of the rest of the poem is abandoned for the curt: "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."

An important area of experience which Larkin explores through the dramatic monologue is the way in which embarrassment forces people to assume social masks. "Vers de Soci  t  ," from *High Windows*, which is once more very close to Larkin's own voice, is concerned with the conflict between the speaker's preference for solitude and society's demand for intercourse. The poem opens with the speaker's ironic reinterpretation of the true sentiments that lie behind a formal invitation to a party that he knows he will hate: "*My wife and I have asked a crowd of craps / To come and waste their time and ours: perhaps / You'd care to join us?*" And it closes with his own conventional lie framed in polite reply: "*Dear Warlock-Williams: Why, of course.*" The comedy lies in the fact that neither host nor guest really wants the party to take place, and the speaker's immediate, honest response to the invitation is a brutal sneer: "In a pig's arse, friend." The poem records his attempt to explore the reasons for his embarrassed, intemperate reaction. He notes



how the claims that society makes on the individual grow harder to resist as he gets older and, although he is biting satirical about those awful parties where he has to listen to "some bitch / Who's read nothing but *Which*," ask "that ass about his fool research," and fill his evenings with "forks and faces" instead of reading in the company of wind and moon, he also poignantly evokes the darkening evening and the closing in of life: "Day comes to an end. / The gas fire breathes, the trees are darkly swayed." In fact the speaker's attack on party-going is less harsh than it seems, for it is clear from the poem that his sour comments emerge not from any settled, smug conviction of intellectual or moral superiority, but from acute feelings of fear and failure. He suggests that because such gatherings represent, however imperfectly, a human ideal, solitude may be regarded in a fundamental sense as anti-social. But he finds this moral tone even more embarrassing than his anger, because in truth for him, as for so many people, his hosts included, social intercourse is a means of escaping for a while the dreadful pangs of remorse and despair, and the painful acknowledgement of the encroachment of time. The monologue brilliantly traces the movement of the speaker's mind from an instinctively hostile rejection of society's impertinent claims, to a reluctant decision to reconstruct his social mask, a process which ironically inverts the cliché "*All solitude is selfish*" through the realization, both savage and compassionate, that society represents a community of need, of which this party is a poignant if ambiguous symbol.

Of course the dramatic monologue is not the sole poetic form that Larkin employs, but because of its technical complexity and sheer tonal range, it offers a variety of opportunities, unmatched by other verse forms, to explore and develop the creative potential inherent in embarrassment. Larkin is passionately concerned to record what it is like to be living an ordinary life in contemporary English society, and embarrassment is a pervasive and powerful emotion in his poetry because it registers our moral sensibility operating at the point where social values impinge on our view of ourselves, a process which in a real sense helps to define and validate our humanity.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The exception is Christopher Ricks, *Keats and Embarrassment* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1974).
- <sup>2</sup> From *High Windows* (London: Faber and Faber, 1974). All poems cited in this article are from this book or from *The Less Deceived* (Hessle: The Marvell Press, 1955), or *The Whitsun Weddings* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964).
- <sup>3</sup> Ian Hamilton, "Four Conversations: Philip Larkin," *London Magazine*, 4 (May 1964), 74-75.
- <sup>4</sup> Philip Larkin, "The Pleasure Principle," *Listen*, 11 (Summer-Autumn 1957), 29.
- <sup>5</sup> D. J. Enright, ed., *Poets of the 1950's: An Anthology of New English Verse* (Tokyo: Kenyusha, 1955), p. 77.
- <sup>6</sup> *The Observer* (16 December 1979), 35.
- <sup>7</sup> "The Pleasure Principle," 29.
- <sup>8</sup> Ian Hamilton, p. 74.
- <sup>9</sup> Neil Powell, *Carpenters of Light* (Manchester: Carcanet New Press, 1979), p. 86.
- <sup>10</sup> John Press, "English Verse Since 1945," in *Essays by Divers Hands*, ed. Peter Green (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 169.
- <sup>11</sup> D. J. Enright, p. 78.
- <sup>12</sup> Ian Hamilton, p. 76.