

Philip Larkin by Philip Larkin

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I may flatter myself, but I think in one sense I'm like Evelyn Waugh or John Betjeman, in that there's not much to *say* about my work. When you've read a poem, that's it, it's all quite clear what it means. (RW 53)

IT WOULD BE ARROGANT to suggest that Larkin's comments on his own poetry are naïve, but equally rash to suppose he is merely pulling the reader's leg; and yet it might be foolhardy to accept such statements as the above as a literal or exhaustive account of Larkin's poetry. The only certainty, in fact, is that Larkin's attempt to disarm the professional critic paradoxically stimulates the critical discourse which the poet thought unnecessary. It is a cautionary example for the present study.

Larkin is an elusive, if not ambivalent figure and discussion of his poetry correspondingly resorts to guarded attitudes. To avoid such critical hedging, therefore, I would immediately suggest that Larkin is *not* a nihilist, a satirist or even a "mere" writer of social verse; he *is* an extremely funny poet. The poems are hardly more "influenced" by Hardy (for all Larkin's confessed admiration) than they are by Dylan Thomas! Surprisingly, perhaps, the precursor *is* still Yeats, although there are peculiar affinities with Wordsworth. There *is* a real sense of circumscription or confinement in his poetry, but this cannot be ascribed to any thinness of literary production or the insularity of his peculiar Englishness. It stems rather from what might be called a "provincialism of feeling," exemplified by a certain restriction in emotional range. But

such judgments are no more than a mildly revisionist gesture, easily overshadowed by the scope and competence of other Larkin criticism.¹ More relevant to my present purpose, however, is the notion that where the life itself appears as something essentially dull and “unlived,” critical focus shifts readily to the very rhetoric of autobiography rather than to its actual historicity. For, most significant of all, Larkin is *not* simply a detached creator of autonomous poetic *personae*; the poems are to a large extent autobiographical — if in a strikingly modern form — and my pursuit of this last claim will provide the core of the present essay.

In this process, I shall move freely between the poetry and the invariably entertaining, often illuminating, comments scattered throughout Larkin’s miscellaneous writings, in an attempt to show that the same kind of authorial assumptions and the same autobiographical stimuli, presented with a similar range of rhetorical strategies, operate in both verse and prose.

I shall first illustrate these various assumptions and strategies by examining Larkin’s own attitude both towards the poetic tradition and towards specific literary influences, paying particular attention to the poet’s relationship to Yeats and Wordsworth. I shall then turn to the autobiographical element in Larkin’s verse and miscellaneous writings and consider the various rhetorical transformations it undergoes in each medium. At this point, I shall accept at face value Larkin’s claim that “poems are about oneself,” and regard his own poems as representing that characteristically modern form of autobiography, the “fragmented” expression of the “divided” self. The emergent autobiographical discourse, finally, will be shown in passing relation to two influential notions of the genre, those of M. H. Abrams and Paul de Man.

It might be objected here that the actuality of literary influence in Larkin’s poetry bears little relation to the question of autobiographical content and that, for this reason, the two topics should not be juxtaposed. Closer consideration should reveal, however, that the procedure is defensible on various grounds: most obviously, the poet’s disavowal of literary influence (in terms of “tradition” or “the common myth kitty,” for example), *queried* in the first part of this essay, may be compared to a similar detachment and

ambivalence — also tantamount to a disavowal — with regard to autobiography, discussed later.

But the analogy does not always hold; Larkin, after all, sometimes quotes his own poems *verbatim* as autobiographical reminiscence or unmediated opinion. It is less, therefore, the disavowals themselves than the identical rhetorical strategies Larkin uses to proclaim them which links the question of literary influence to that of autobiography.

And yet the final vindication of the structure of the essay derives from a demonstration that poetic discourse and autobiographical discourse (with the poetic and the autobiographical “selves” they imply) are ultimately inseparable in Larkin. For this reason alone, the initial discussion of intertextuality and its combination with an interest in the autobiographical subject would be entirely justified.

I

I believe that every poem must be its own sole freshly created universe, and therefore have no belief in ‘tradition’ or a common myth kitty or casual allusions in poems to other poems or poets, which last I find unpleasantly like the talk of literary understrappers letting you see they know the right people. (*RW* 79)²

The above lines appeared in a brief statement sent by Larkin to D. J. Enright in 1955 for the latter’s *Poets of the 1950’s* (published in Japan in 1956). Having originally offered the remarks as “raw material” for an introduction, Larkin describes himself as feeling “rather dashed” to find them printed by Enright *verbatim*. One may only wonder which element of youthful outspokenness proved distressing to the older, more guarded Larkin; and yet, after almost thirty years of writing poetry which subverts or even refutes the views expressed in this passage, Larkin then publishes the same lines *verbatim* himself, in a retrospective anthology wittily but disarmingly entitled *Required Writing*. It is a suggestive example of Larkin’s ambivalence and a second cautionary example for the insensitive critic.

Insensitive or not, by tacitly ignoring Larkin’s pronouncement, critics themselves have gradually expanded the web of allusions to “other poems or poets.” In the present section I shall follow Lar-

kin's own comments and opinions on the questions of literary influences and the poetic tradition, viewing them less as definitive judgments on his own literary antecedents, than as a series of subtle rhetorical shifts. His range in this context is considerable, moving from the *intimate* or *confessional* through *irony* and *hyperbole* to even a suggestion of *farce*. His hyperbolic rejection of the poetic tradition or his farcical dismissal of foreign poets are misleading, but ultimately transparent; his attitude towards Yeats or Wordsworth, fluctuating between intimate sympathy and ironic detachment, is harder to gauge. Instead of attempting to resolve these contradictions, I shall suggest that real interest lies less in the literal contents of Larkin's often amusing pronouncements than in the actual variety of rhetorical forms they assume. The case of Yeats will provide an instructive example of this process.

The introduction to the reprint of *The North Ship* (1973) apparently records the casting off of Yeats and the taking on of Hardy. It is a highly circumscribed, if not caricatured, Yeats thus abandoned: a figure limited to "infatuating music" and "Celtic fever," and Larkin himself seems to make a passing acknowledgement to his limited appreciation of Yeats ("I never absorbed the harsher last poems"). For the rest, any anxiety of influence is exorcised painlessly and almost facetiously ("it is a particularly potent music, pervasive as garlic, and has ruined many a better talent" *NS* 9), the whole process suggesting some genteel, muted re-enactment of the Bloomian paradigm. But it is difficult not to regard Larkin's squeamish dismissal of Yeats and his indifference to the later poems as more rhetoric than substance.

The additional poem in the reprint of *The North Ship* ("Waiting for breakfast while she brushed her hair") is admittedly intended to show "the Celtic fever abated and the patient sleeping soundly" (*NS* 10). And yet the first poem of the collection is highly evocative of the *late* Yeats, with its bleak refrain ("A drum taps: a wintry drum") recalling similarly haunting knells in the Crazy Jane poems ("All find safety in the tomb") or an even later lyric ("Daybreak and a candle end"); whilst the second stanza ("Gull, grass and girl / In air, earth or bed") is almost a parody ("Fish, flesh or fowl, commend all summer long / Whatever is begotten, born and dies") of "Sailing to Byzantium."

And if the slightly patronizing expression "Celtic fever" really is the appropriate term for the measured intensity of Yeats's later poems, it nevertheless still lingers in Larkin a decade later. Thus, "Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album" (the opening poem of *The Less Deceived*) begins with an impassioned reverie over the picture of a young woman:

At last you yielded up the album, which
Once open, sent me distracted. . . .

where the poet's nostalgia immediately recalls the Yeats of "Among Schoolchildren" reminiscing on the image of Maud Gonne:

And thereupon my heart is driven wild:
She stands before me as a living child.

Finally at the age of sixty, a knowing and more perceptive Larkin (if never actually a smiling public man) shows a keener and more subtle critical awareness of his debt to Yeats in "the management of lines, the formal distancing of emotion," as he draws the final balance in a memorable image: Yeats is no longer (any more than Auden) explicit in his poetry, because he is "like scaffolding that's been taken down" (*RW* 67).

Wordsworth is another poet with whom Larkin's relations are ambivalent and the rhetoric again fluctuates accordingly. Larkin shows considerable insight about poetic inspiration in his amusing but shrewd analogy: "Deprivation is for me what daffodils were for Wordsworth" (*RW* 47); or disarming candour — "Wordsworth was nearly the price of me once" (*RW* 53) — when he describes a chance broadcast of the "Immortality Ode" heard on the car radio while driving at full speed — for Larkin was almost blinded by tears. But this moving recollection of one particular Wordsworth poem is ironically qualified by a remark elsewhere comparing the poet unfavourably to Tennyson: "the general reader would sooner be wrecked on a desert island with a complete Tennyson than with a complete Wordsworth" (*RW* 184). The assiduous reader of Larkin will again recognize the characteristic tone of discreet provocation ("one wonders what the world of English studies would say" *RW* 184); it is the same rhetorical flourish found in the poet who equated Yeats with Celtic fever or

“who would not wish Hardy’s *Collected Poems* a single page shorter” (*RW* 174).

The world of English studies probably *has* provided the last word on Larkin’s relationship to Wordsworth in a suggestive essay by David Lodge. Quoting examples of Larkin’s “low” diction and conscious cliché:

I lie
Where Mr Bleaney lay, and stub my fags
On the same saucer
(“Mr Bleaney,” *WW* 10)

When I see a couple of kids
And guess he’s fucking her
(“High Windows,” *HW* 17)

Lodge (215) wittily makes a link to Wordsworth’s declared intention in the “Preface to the Lyrical Ballads”: “to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them throughout, as far as was possible in a selection of language really used by men . . .,” and this stylistic element may effectively be Larkin’s most conspicuous link with Wordsworth.

The relation to Yeats and Wordsworth, then, is ambivalent. Larkin’s own comments seem to exist less as critical discourse than as rhetorical figuration: now ironically detached, now mildly exaggerated or disarmingly intimate, he has indeed learned “the management of lines.” I would emphasize again that the real closeness to Yeats and Wordsworth is not revealed in any specific verse or prose quotation, but rather in the rhetorical *range* (from reverence to mockery) of Larkin’s critical responses; both poets exist in Larkin as some kind of ubiquitous intertext.

By a complementary rhetorical process, it is precisely the relatively standardized responses towards influences or allusions from foreign poetry which paradoxically suggest the lesser importance of these issues for Larkin.

In this context, apart from a realistic assessment of the linguistic gap (“I don’t see how one can ever know a foreign language well enough to make reading poems in it worthwhile” *RW* 69), the scattered remarks on foreign poetry and poets must surely represent the farcical element of Larkin’s rhetorical repertoire. Consider:

“... deep down I think foreign languages are irrelevant ...” or “*Hautes Fenêtres*, my God! A writer can only have one language ...” (*RW* 69); or such memorable comments as “Who’s Jorge Luis Borges?” and “Foreign poetry, No” (*RW* 60), where he enters the realm of literary slapstick. Sadly, Larkin’s aesthetic limitations might be seen to owe more to simple cultural insularity (“I hate being abroad” *RW* 55) than to any linguistic barrier, since his admitted indifference apparently extends to “foreign” verse in English (“I’m afraid I know very little about American poetry” *RW* 70).

And yet the facts again argue otherwise: the early “Femmes Damnées” is a palimpsest of Baudelaire’s poem (“evidence that I once read at least one ‘foreign poem’,” as Larkin grudgingly admits [*Motion* 73]), whilst “Sympathy in White Major” alludes directly to a poem by Gautier. Most revealingly of all, Larkin the little Englander may actually be caught quoting lines in the original German:

Was ich besitze, seh’ich im Weiten
Und was verschwand, wird mir zu Wirklichkeiten
(*RW* 147)

One may now appreciate more fully the rhetoric of the epigraph to this section. As a literary credo, its crudity may have embarrassed an older and wiser Larkin; for where poetic tradition is concerned, one may pertinently cite two of the poet’s most memorable images:

Only one ship is seeking us, a black-
Sailed unfamiliar, towing at her back
A huge and birdless silence. . . .

there swelled
A sense of falling, like an arrow-shower
Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain. . . .

Here the archetypal Death Barque from “Next, Please” (*LD* 20) and fertility symbols of “The Whitsun Weddings” (*WW* 21) sound suspiciously like the “common myth kitty” so roundly dismissed!

It is ultimately difficult to isolate the author's critical pronouncements from his talent and penchant for humour and irony. The opening remark in one of his rarely accorded interviews: "Actually I like to think of myself as quite funny, and I hope this comes through in my writing" (*RW* 47), deserves more than passing notice. The comic exaggeration, the rhetorical flourish or the critical pose — evident in his discussion of weightier matters such as poetic influences or the literary tradition — reappear throughout his writing. The results are not always free from contradiction; there is no evidence they are even intended to be.

One remembers the amusing comparison of medieval monasteries (where monks were paid to offer prayers which others could not be bothered to formulate) to English schools which we pay "to praise authors . . . whom personally we find unreadable" (*RW* 184). For Larkin in iconoclastic mood, Wordsworth could approach the latter category, Spenser was its perfect exponent. Still in the academic context, Larkin could gibe at the "dutiful mob who sign on every September" (*RW* 82), and yet his own career as a university librarian implies a long and fruitful cooperation with the same mob, whilst his fellowship at All Souls College, Oxford, suggests that — once at least — he was not averse to signing on, himself.

And a final pointer: members of the Hull University library staff showed the kind of sophistication lacking in some more literal minded readers when, at a party marking the twenty-fifth anniversary of the poet's residence in the city, they presented him with a card inscribed with a quotation from the poem "Places, Loved Ones" (*LD* 16):

No, I have never found
The place where I could say
This is my proper ground,
Here I shall stay. . . .

Here was a place where he *had* stayed; *touché*, as Larkin was prompt to admit.

These jokes, paradoxes, contradictions or more subtle shifts, therefore, are a crucial element in Larkin's poetry and prose writings. If the poetry really is slim in volume and limited in

emotional range, there is more than adequate compensation in the pleasure of tracing the rhetorical play of Larkin's dyadic — poetic and autobiographical — discourse.

II

[N]ovels are about other people and poems are about yourself.
(RW 49)

In the present section I shall turn more specifically to the autobiographical element in Larkin's poetry and the rhetoric of its presentation. The private allusions scattered through his verse cannot always be authenticated as biographical material, particularly with such a reticent human subject, but there is some corroboration in Larkin's own habit of directly linking sentiments in a poem with his own life or attitudes. The emergent autobiographical element (in both poetry and prose) is, however, fragmentary and dissonant, as may be seen by closer examination of two tendencies: according to the first of these, poetic *personae* apparently crystallize into complementary or conflicting projections of the *subject in question*; or alternatively, the autobiographical trope, itself, dissolves into mere rhetorical play. The latter process will be related to two contemporary theories of autobiography.

Some poems, then, contain details evidently so personal that it seems over-ingenious to regard the speaker as an autonomous poetic *persona*:

As when, happy at being on my own,
I searched the sand for Famous Cricketers,
(“To the Sea,” HW 9)

The reference to the picture cards of well-known sportsmen, found in most cigarette brands before the Second World War, has the circumstantial flavour of Proustian minutiae, whilst a scene like the following:

You can see how it was:
Look at the pictures and the cutlery.
The music in the piano stool. That vase.
(“Home is So Sad,” WW 17)

has a similar suggestion of barely mediated *image-repertoire*.

And yet, rather than chase elusive autobiographical references, we should consider Larkin's casual linking of the poems with his own personal opinions and experiences; this provides an antidote to undue critical emphasis on impersonality and poetic personae, whilst illustrating the proposed "complementary" aspect of Larkin's self-projections. In his interview with the *Paris Review* in 1982, for example, he confided "Yes, I've remained single by choice, and shouldn't have liked anything else" (*RW* 65), whilst in another conversation in the London *Observer* in 1979 (*RW* 54) he echoes these reservations by quoting *verbatim* two verses of an uncollected poem:

Who can be satisfied
 Putting someone else first,
 So that you come off worst?

My life is for me:
 As well deny gravity.

where the interesting point is less the sentiment itself than Larkin's readiness to quote a poem as unmediated opinion.

Even when referring to some of his most notorious lines ("They fuck you up your mum and dad" or "Books are a load of crap"), he significantly makes no attempt to distance himself from the sentiments expressed, or to take refuge behind the concept of a *persona*. The first quotation he is content to gloss in more restrained terms ("I wouldn't want it thought that I didn't like my parents. But at the same time they were rather awkward people and not very good at being happy"); whilst his comments on the second proposition ("sentiments to which every bosom returns an echo" *RW* 48), may simply represent a librarian's catharsis.

The semi-articulate voice in "A Study of Reading Habits" (*WW* 31) remembers adolescence:

When getting my nose in a book
 Cured most things short of school. . . .

These terms are uncannily similar to Larkin's prose recollection of "reading at the rate of a book a day, even despite the tiresome interruptions of morning and afternoon school." (Brownjohn 4).

But if such examples are “complementary,” a poem like “Mr Bleaney” (*WW* 10) introduces an additional element of “conflict.” Larkin tells us that the poem was written at Hull in 1955-56 (*RW* 56), whilst a prose piece a few years later depicts the poet himself leading a Bleaney-like existence (“I know his habits — what time he came down”) when living in Leicester:

The room was at the top of the house (a familiar situation to me:
I have lived most of my working life in rooms at the top of houses
— I am in one now) (*RW* 36)

Petch has found a carefully articulated contrast between the self-conscious, even resentful, speaker and the mild unassuming Bleaney (Petch 56); it is just as feasible, however, to regard both figures as “conflicting” projections of Larkin, the one painfully aware of “fat neglected chances / That we insensately forebore to fleece” (“Triple Time,” *LD* 35), the other illustrating a more reductive attitude of “Why did he think adding meant increase? / To me it was dilution” (“Dockery and Son,” *WW* 38).

But an ultimate transformation of autobiography to pure rhetorical play appears in Larkin’s evocation of the pampered writer. In the humorous detachment of the *Observer* interview the poet records, in explicit autobiographical discourse, his naïve preconceptions of professional success:

I’d have visions of myself writing 500 words a day for six months,
shoving the result off to the printer and going to live on the Côte
D’Azur, uninterrupted except for the correction of proofs. (*RW*
49)

One may trace such hyperbolic or even parodic images of triumphant achievement throughout the poetry: the ruthless exploiter of “fat insensate chances” or the more subtle winner of “fame and the girl and the money / All at one sitting.” (“Toads,” *LD* 33). But in lesser known presentation of the same motif in poetic discourse, character collapses through caricature to cliché, while irony reduces hyperbole and mere alliterative rhetoric:

So the shit in the shuttered château
Who does his five hundred words

Then parts out the rest of the day
 Between bathing and booze and birds. . . .
 ("The Life with a Hole in it,"
 cited Zillekens 133)

What was an "I" in autobiographical discourse is, in poetic discourse, ironically transformed into a series of alliterative tropes. Larkin, the jazz critic, incidentally uses the same rhetorical device in reducing all his modernist antipathies to Pound, Parker and Picasso (*RW* 292).

At the point, therefore, where character finally reduces to rhetorical figure, we may seek a model for Larkin's autobiographical discourse.

M. H. Abrams in *Natural Supernaturalism* sees autobiography as internalized quest, not for salvation, not for erotic communion, but for creative significance, a formula which might at first sight seem loosely applicable to Larkin; but the post-romantic transformation (to paraphrase Abrams) of confessional genre to autobiographical mode, with the retention of a simplistic, religiously determined epistemological "plot" (fall, return, integration) is not ultimately appropriate; for whatever technical evolution Larkin's poetry undergoes, its autobiographical dimension surely denies any teleological notions. His ironies and reversals, his fragmentation and dispersal of the self, are in fact more amenable to a second, antithetical, model of autobiography: the deconvolutive labyrinth of Paul de Man. In *Allegories of Reading* de Man suggests that:

the recuperation of selfhood would be accomplished by the rigor with which the discourse deconstructs the very notion of the self. . . . (173)

This is a more relevant notion to apply to a body of verse whose ultimate effect is to reduce human identity to mere rhetorical tropes.

De Man might almost be referring to Larkin when he claims that "the action proper to autobiography is not historical but rhetorical." He goes on to suggest that all autobiographical discourse is tropological and draws the radical conclusion:

We assume that life *produces* the autobiography as an act produces its consequences, but can we not suggest, with equal justice, that

the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life and whatever the writer *does* is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture. . . . (“Autobiography as Defacement” 992)

New light indeed on the “shit in the shuttered château” with his “bathing, booze and birds,” and yet, at a deeper level, de Man’s hypothesis throws light on Larkin’s typical rhetorical shifts. For it seems otiose to claim merely that poetic “self” and autobiographical “self” become indistinguishable; more realistic to acknowledge the tendency of both to reduce to mere rhetorical tropes so that no empirical self may in fact be recoverable. “Defacement” of the self, as de Man describes it, may also be accompanied by a parallel disintegration in the rhetorical system of the poem. The final section of the present essay will attempt to provide examples of the latter process.

III

Poetry is an affair of sanity, of seeing things as they are. (Motion 12)

It would be counter to our approach thus far were it not possible to show that specific texts contradict Larkin’s simple faith in representation reflected in this quotation. Paul Jay traces the way in which the wholeness and coherence of the self are undermined by a “variety of twentieth century self-reflexive works,” culminating in the systematic deconstruction of *Roland Barthes* by Roland Barthes. In the latter, the subject exists, in Jay’s words, as “divided,” “dispersed,” “contradictory” and without a “central core” in a series of randomly ordered fragments (178). It is another paradigm easily applicable to the present *subject*. Larkin and Barthes are at first sight an unlikely pair: the “poet next door” and the epitome of “the mad lads,” (to reinvest two of Larkin’s own phrases) — but *Roland Barthes* reveals striking affinities with the implied *Philip Larkin*. The corpus of verse formed by *The Less Deceived*, *The Whitsun Weddings* and *High Windows* also undergoes a continuous process of creating and dissolving perspectives, even as certain individual poems question the very concept of authorial intention.

The final section of this essay will examine more closely three poems which clearly reflect these characteristic fluctuations, whilst they highlight the actual epistemological problems involved. I begin with the lesser known "Homage to a Government," with its gesture to political ideology, and conclude with a brief analysis of "Toads" and "Toads Revisited," with their ostensible contrast of daily routine and existentialist freedom.

"Homage to a Government" (*HW* 29) represents one of Larkin's rare forays into politics. A poem on national trauma at the dismantlement of Empire — apparently prompted by British military withdrawal from Aden in the sixties — is unlikely to arouse universal sympathy or interest; critical comment on the poem, therefore, is generally confined to a cursory glance at narrative voice. And yet it is through the mediation of this voice that the poem provides such a curious example of ambivalent discourse. The voice itself is diffident and apologetic. If there is no reason for bringing the troops home, there is similarly no motive expressed — certainly not vision or conviction, not even self-interest or expediency — for *keeping them there* either. Larkin was apparently upset by a troop withdrawal on purely economic grounds, unsupported by ideological principle; the resultant poem reflects a crisis in national identity:

It's hard to say who wanted it to happen,
But now it's been decided nobody minds.
The places are a long way off, not here,
Which is all right. . . .

Here, the argument of the poem is clearly undermined by the voice, thus establishing a conflict within the rhetorical system of the poem. Thus the withdrawal of troops is not really equivocal or even motivated by pure economic factors, as the poem suggests; for the same feeble, apologetic voice *is* an embodiment of the precise reason why the troops *should* be brought home. It remains the only recourse of unconfident nations who have lost their sense of purpose or who, to quote another Larkin poem, have become as "vague as weed" ("Nothing to be Said," *WW* 11) in the manner of the speaker.

The two "Toad" poems offer more substantial examples of this kind of contradiction (where the argument of the poem is undermined by the "tone"). "Toads" (*LD* 32) often passes as a finely balanced dialectic on the drudgery of daily life versus the lure of freedom and independence. Both states are caricatured and embrace a rhetoric of representation that Larkin has used elsewhere, culminating in the crudities of "bathing, booze and birds." The poem's conclusion is apparently a resigned acceptance of the "Toad" mentality; and yet two of the most striking passages seem to deny this admission. I refer to the alliterative third verse:

Lots of folk live on their wits:
Lecturers, lispers,
Losels, loblolly-men, louts —

If the inclusion of *lecturers* among the ranks of social parasites is a private Larkin joke (one with which we are by now familiar), the other categories mentioned hardly seem appropriate. Neither *louts* or *lispers* are immediately associated with quick-wittedness; *losel* is a highly obscure word and *loblolly-man* another term of which no-one need be ashamed to confess ignorance. Not to labour a point, the repeated "l" sounds may have some esoteric connotation, unless they reflect mere linguistic exuberance or plain semantic perversity; alternatively, and more dramatically, they suggest a virtual meaninglessness, what in the context is almost a string of signifiers without signifieds. The lines thus represent an ironic reversal, for as the central metaphor develops, the "toads" become identifiable with the speaker of the poem, who finally admits his own dependence on routine and drudgery; and yet in the heart of the discourse, with its *bricolage* of almost arbitrary referents, the text writes otherwise: *the toad is living by its wits*.

The final stanza illustrates a similar ironic reversal as it juggles deftly with the existentialist polarities of the poem:

I don't say, one bodies the other
One's spiritual truth;
But I do say it's hard to lose either,
When you have both.

Linguistic wit is now supplemented by metaphysical wit of such density that meaning is barely recoverable — and the lines further

undermine the poem's erstwhile tone of insufficiency and self-effacement. For a mere *toad*, both verses are virtuoso performances.

"Toads Revisited" (*WW* 18) is probably the most interesting example among all of Larkin's poems of the implicitly subversive text. Published a decade after "Toads," it also lacks the expository equilibrium of the earlier poem, prefiguring — if not pre-judging — its own conclusion: "Walking round in the park" is "Not a bad place to be. / Yet it doesn't suit me. . . ." The poem's conclusion carries the personification of the toad a stage further: "Give me your arm, old toad; / Help me down Cemetery Road . . .," thus recapitulating the autobiographical nexus, with a witty topographical allusion to an actual street in Larkin's home town of Hull. It seems unambiguous in its resignation, and yet a closer reading of the poem should question such a simplistic assumption. The harsh comment, for example, on those not gainfully employed:

All dodging the toad work
By being stupid or weak.
Think of being them!

does not inspire sympathy and confidence in the speaker; it should thus, by association, undermine the authority of the assertion that work is necessary or even inevitable. Such an anomaly may be interpreted in terms of conscious structural irony, but once again — now in the last two stanzas — the text seems to acquire an autonomous existence, as it becomes caught up in a rhetorical network of undecidability. The process begins with the semantic reverberations of the word "call" in the penultimate stanza:

No, give me my in-tray,
My loaf-haired secretary,
My shall-I-keep-the-call-in-Sir:

with its allusions — at least — to a *telephone call* and an *existentialist call* to a world of freedom beyond toads, but possibly also to the *call of death* implied in the final stanza. Whether or not the question itself was ambivalent, the response is a counter-ambiguity already beyond resolution. The concluding "What else can I answer, / When the lights come on at four . . ." parallels exactly the famous questions cited by Paul de Man in *Allegories of Read-*

ing: Archie Bunker's "What's the difference?" at his wife's offer to lace his bowling shoes over or under, or Yeats's conclusion to "Among School-children": "How can we know the dancer from the dance?" In conceptual terms:

A perfectly clear syntactical paradigm (the question) engenders a sentence that has at least two meanings, of which the one asserts and the other denies its own interlocutory mode. . . . (de Man 10)

Far from "seeing things as they are," "Toads Revisited" would appear to suspend logic and suggest, in de Man's memorable phrase, "vertiginous possibilities of referential aberration" (10).

Along with "Homage to a Government" and "Toads," the poem represents a particularly striking example of textual subversion in Larkin's poetry. The consideration of the three poems concludes an argument which began by examining the poet's literary judgments and putative autobiographical recollections, emphasizing the ambivalent and paradoxical aspects of both. The effect of certain rhetorical strategies common to poetry and prose was a blurring of the distinction between "poetic" and "autobiographical" discourse. The essay then traced an erosion of authorial power and stressed a process of signifying operating *in defiance of*, rather than *in accordance with*, authorial intentionality, when it did not actually postulate a case of undecidability.

Such methods, of course, might easily be turned against the present essay. A study which questions the distinction between *autobiographical* and *poetic* discourse (tending to reduce both to pure topology), or which confronts authorial intentions with assertions of undecidability, must also question the validity of *critical* discourse. Is not the latter, too, in danger of dissolving into mere rhetorical play?

I can only attempt to forestall such objections by referring finally to two more poems which seem to convey explicitly the kind of "referential aberrations" I have tried to uncover — and where lengthy analysis is superfluous.

"Self's the Man" presents the bachelor's reflections on the sacrifices demanded of his married colleague; the pivot of the poem is located between the fifth and sixth stanzas, with the abrupt shift from simple feelings of guilt to a more subtle sense of collusion:

To compare his life and mine
 Makes me feel a swine:
 Oh, no one can deny
 That Arnold is less selfish than I.

But wait, not so fast,
 Is there such a contrast?
 He was out for his own ends
 Not just pleasing his friends. . . .

(*WW* 24)

The argument follows a dialectic pattern which is common enough in Larkin's verse, but a far more disquieting reversal occurs in the final lines:

Only I'm a better hand
 At knowing what I can stand
 Without them sending a van —
 Or I suppose I can.

(*WW* 25)

with their frightening implication of an infinitely receding series of claims and counterclaims, beyond hope of resolution

Such isolated doubts on the plausibility and validity of closure find broader confirmation in "If my Darling," where the *adressée* — if she could enter the speaker's head — would merely find:

the incessant recital

Intoned by reality, larded with technical terms,
 Each one double-yolked with meaning and meaning's rebuttal.

(*LD* 42)

When Larkin had the courage to confront his own epistemological impasse, the critic can only follow his example.

NOTES

¹ I should particularly like to acknowledge the stimulating insights gained from reading the monographs of Alan Brownjohn, Andrew Motion and Simon Petch, as well as the chapter on Larkin in Calvin Bedient's *Eight Contemporary Poets*.

² The abbreviation *RW* is used to designate *Required Writing*, the collection of Larkin's miscellaneous prose writings from 1955-1982. The poetry collections are also referred to in abbreviated form as follows: *NS*: *The North Ship*, *LD*: *The Less Deceived*, *WW*: *The Whitsun Weddings*, and *HW*: *High Windows*.

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