



A “Modern” Flâneur: Larkin’s Journeys and the Emergence of “Elsewhere”.

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Abstract: Larkin scholarship has, for decades, orientated its criticism of the poet’s work around a tacitly-accepted set of norms connected to the poet’s attitudes towards travel. Such opinionative norms predominantly uphold an image of the poet as a sort of recluse; a caricature of a hermit, whose undying attachment to the Humber Estuary and its environs is somehow inextricably linked to, and a prerequisite for, a proper understanding of the poet’s voice and personae. While Larkin did voice a ‘hatred of abroad’ as early as 1936 (Booth21), critical attempts to move beyond his often throwaway denunciation of “the foreign” have invariably galvanised a mode of scholarly approach which remains doggedly insensitive to the subtle array of agendas and allegiances towards travel which sit deep within his poetic. In this article, I attempt to explore these allegiances, arguing that the image of Baudelaire’s flâneur develops a motivic significance throughout the poet’s middle-era work. Equally, I argue that travel for Larkin was an attempt to indulge auto-erotic proclivities, as well as to engage in the attendant critical discourses connected with travel, popularised both before and after the turn of the 19th century.

Keywords: Philip Larkin, Charles Baudelaire, Flâneur, Travel, Place, Twentieth Century Poetry

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‘Here’ – the opening poem of *The Whitsun Weddings* – sees Larkin deploying a rhetorical technique whose affect is as striking as it is uncharacteristic of the poet’s stylistic mode. The poem commences with an eight-line stanza featuring a single sentence that, by Larkin’s own admission, ‘is frightful to read aloud’ owing to its dizzying extension across ‘twenty-four-and-a-half lines’ (FR 59). During the stanza, Larkin uses one verb, ‘swerving’, which he repeats in the present continuous tense three times, separated by semi-colons, to form what is perhaps the poet’s most elaborate display of epanaphoria in his entire oeuvre. The effect is arresting: a repeated use of an identical verb may seem bold and confounding enough, but the very choice of verb and its suggestions of ungoverned, reckless motion, mesmerises the reader, and causes attention to linger. These connotations, too, are in turn deconstructed and considered; from ‘swerving east, from rich industrial shadows’, to the more ethereal image of ‘swerving through fields’, eventually culminating, ironically, in the figurative ‘swerving to solitude’ by which time the word’s visceral and kinetic associations seem to be dispelled, and subsumed within the very linguistic dexterity which Larkin, as poet, forces the word to uphold.

Even for the Larkin scholar, reading ‘Here’ directly after *The Less Deceived* is somewhat arresting. Its unannounced arrival, and the vertiginous relief with which it positions itself as separate from Larkin’s two previous collections, both of which possess a tone and pace that seem broadly reflective of the poet’s careful, fastidious nature, smack of a new poetic agenda; a poetic breakthrough or a change in direction or voice. And yet reading beyond ‘Here’, one quickly senses that this new characterisation of Larkin as an adventurer withers almost as quickly as it is constructed, and folds back into the poet’s more tried-and-tested route of *in situ* meditations upon places and their people; it is – as is not untypical for Larkin – a stylistic false alarm; a prolegomenon that reneges upon its promises almost as quickly as it yields them and, in doing so, raises many more questions than it does answers. While it confirms, indeed, that the breathiness of Yeats (whose voice haunted *The North Ship* and lingered, despite Hardy’s influence, throughout much of *The Less Deceived*) has been finally eschewed, it refuses to confer any new, clear set of literary allegiances from which one might claim Larkin’s new stylistic and topical interests are derived.

One is tempted, on reading ‘Here’, to extract some form of biographical elucidation out of the nine-year gap that separates *The Whitsun Weddings* from Larkin’s previous two poetry collections. Even the most stalwart Formalist critic would be tempted to peek behind the text at the circumstances in Larkin’s life that might have impelled this new interest in the poetic expression of travel and/or adventure. Larkin, however, is – superficially at least – obtuse and unforthcoming in revealing any change in artistic temperament during this period, stating with characteristic elusiveness that the nine-year lacuna between *The Less Deceived* and *The Whitsun Weddings* owed itself to ‘finding out what to say as well as how to say it, and that takes time’¹. Similarly, his words on the poem itself are cryptic and contradictory: initially claiming that poem ‘is pushing on into a bloodier and bloodier area’ – the implication behind these words is soon undermined in a letter to Robert Conquest in which Larkin refers to the poem, rather diminutively, as a ‘plain description’ (*FR* 59). All other attempts to explain the poem’s pace, wayward set of geographies, and oscillatory directional bearing are limited, either to cross-references with Larkin’s prose accounts of Hull in essays such as ‘A Place to Write’², or hidden in letters such as that to Professor Laurence Perrine in 1980 about a train journey to the Holderness Peninsula (Burnett 392)³. Little matter, one might think, given that ‘Here’s later stanzas go on to denunciate 1960’s urbanity in a register and tone far more characteristic of Larkin-the-Poet, and so far more appealing, and striking, to the contemporary Larkin scholar.

At this point, it might seem understandable why the critic has, by and large, eschewed approaching the topic of travel and ‘foreign influence’ in Larkin’s writing. The subject appears to be the focus of an unending series of uncertainties and anxieties for the poet – both personal and creative – which makes the isolation of any one ‘travel-agenda’, or influence, difficult to identify. Indeed, seeking a broader, contextual elucidation of ‘Here’ by means of investigating Larkin’s personal interest in travel in general, is equally inchoate. This is compounded by the fact that critical interest in Larkin’s poetic manifestation of travel, or its experiential derivations, are almost non-existent. James Booth goes some way towards redressing this in his marked coverage of Larkin’s family holidays in Europe, and the topographic and cultural derivations that inform *A Girl in Winter*’s heroine, Katherine Lind (*LAL* 18-19; 103-106), while Burnett’s anthology, *The Complete Poems*, lists a clutch of previously unpublished travel poems. Neither, however, meditates lastingly upon the profound critical opportunities that lie within this field centring around Larkin’s presentation of places and spaces while on the move. If we do linger on this subject, however, some remarkable things come to the fore. Firstly, a close look into the tendencies of Larkin reveal that he did cosset a personal interest in travel. This interest is corroborated, in no small way, by the significant number of holidays he undertook regularly to distant quarters of the United Kingdom, as far afield as the Inner Hebrides, primarily with Monica Jones⁴. Though prone to misadventure (a minor car crash rather soured the mood of a trip to Scotland in 1968⁵) such holidays were regular, and – more to the point – begrudgingly enjoyed. Oddly, such trips rarely informed the content of his poetry; instead, travel appeared to exact a much more indelible mark on Larkin’s sense of *self* as a poet – a sequestered portion of *self* that was fraught with anxiety, and went largely unpoeticised during his lifetime. The relationship Larkin’s poetic persona had with this “mobile-self” was a troubled one, at once charged with frisson, while at times simultaneously – and reflexively – struck by its own sense of incompatibility with the carefully-hewn image of Larkin-the-Man.

Despite only sporadically remarking on Larkin’s personal disinterest in travel⁶, Larkin scholarship has nevertheless taken a marked (though still insufficient, I would argue) interest in the poet’s fondness

¹ from *The Paris Review*, *The Art of Poetry*, No. 30. Interview with Robert Phillips. 84, 1982.

² ‘A Place to Write’ can be found in *A Rumoured City: New Poets from Hull*, 1982.

³ Writing to Professor Perrine, Larkin states, ‘I was thinking of a journey I took many times, catching the Yorkshire Pullman from King’s Cross (London) at 5-20 [sic]p.m., changing at Doncaster’

⁴ An unpublished poem collected in *TCP*, ‘Somewhere on the Isle of Mull’, dated 1952, is an example of such ventures. The best coverage of Larkin’s personal holidays is definitely provided by Motion (1993) and covers trips, mainly in the 1950’s and earlier 1960’s, with Monica Jones. Anna Farthing’s recent exhibition, ‘New Eyes Each Year’, explores Larkin’s previously hidden stash of souvenir tea towels.

⁵ ‘At the top [of Applecross] I pull off the road with all the expertise of a practised driver and tear off my front registration plate’ (*AWL* 385).

⁶ Booth cites Larkin’s correspondence to Amis in which the former describes two family holidays to Germany. The excerpt evokes the same *mélange* of comedy and fear in its speaker as that found in Larkin’s description of

for European thought and literature. Such critical focus has predominantly centred upon Larkin’s devotion to symbolism, and – by proxy rather than by obvious connection – its key progenitors in Mallarmé and Gautier. Barbara Everett has made much of Larkin’s debt to the symbolists in ‘Larkin: After Symbolism’, with her argument most convincing during its close textual analysis of ‘Arrivals, Departures’ alongside Baudelaire’s ‘Le Port’. Everett recognises, and draws attention to, the discordance between the poem’s apparent debt to French ‘symbolist’ forms and Larkin’s own well-documented denunciation of “non-British” poetry; a dismissiveness which is no better summed up than in Larkin’s interview with *The London Magazine* in 1964.⁷ The connection, Everett claims, is a subtle one, with poems like ‘Arrivals, Departures’ alluding to ‘a whole phase of French Symbolist verse with [a] kind of ironic casualness’ (236). Booth, without offering much up-close critical engagement, recalls Larkin’s Brunette Coleman years, and his recollection of Baudelaire’s ‘Femmes Damnées’ in *Trouble At Willow Gables*. However, rather than existing as a symbolic influence in a typical sense, Larkin calls upon Baudelaire’s rubric of ‘hectic moralism’, as a reason for legitimising a swathe of sexual imagery including lesbianism and belt fetishism, which for Booth, acts as means ‘of refining and testing his English voice, or more radically, of evading his Englishness’ (74; 76). Indeed, Larkin’s later admission that his poem ‘Absences’ ‘sounds like a slightly unconvincing translation from a French symbolist’ led him to confirm his wish that he ‘could write like this more often’, thus betraying his former outspoken xenophobia, and offering a certain credence to Booth and Everett’s belief that he upheld a begrudging tie with French literature and that, on occasion, he actively ‘tries to write like a foreigner’ (*LAL* 159; 103). Beyond Europe, Larkin’s attitude to American literature and thought was far from complimentary: his attitude to the poetry of Sylvia Plath was obtuse, dismissing the latter’s confessional style as that which recounts an ‘experience with which we can in no sense identify’, and his frosty reception of Robert Lowell’s compliment that he [Larkin] was the best poet since Dylan Thomas, was snubbed due to Larkin’s opinion that American writers, like those of Bloomsbury, were sycophantic and fraternised closely and openly within “mainstream” literary circles. (*RW* 279; *AWL* 429).

Travel, then, is a deeply multifaceted and slippery subject for Larkin. His personal comments, tastes and poetic *modus operandi* all appear to flit around in a frustrating stand-off. Time now to engage with these concerns, and further the discussion as to what informed Larkin’s construction of ‘elsewhere’, and indeed, what influences of ‘elsewhere’ engaged in its own construction. In this article, I aim to argue that aspects of *The Whitsun Weddings*, in many ways, embody Larkin’s attempt to *reconcile* his narrator’s true sense of ‘self’, with the geospatial ‘otherness’ that tries to force his personae in other directions. In attempting to continually “reset” the narrator back to its original Larkinesque character (and through the depictions of travel themselves) I suggest Larkin effects a series of singular poetic techniques. The successful completion of this processes is embodied, I argue, in his rendering of an all-new place phenomenon – namely the phenomenon of ‘Elsewhere’ – a notion which, much like in ‘Here’, is often in turn drawn into a reflexive and reactive stand-off with the compositional moment. In addition, I argue that the anxiety of subjective fragmentation extends to Larkin’s treatment of foreign literary influences, a handful of which, notably Baudelaire, succeed in having their ideas penetrate Larkin’s xenophobic guard, allowing them to influence, in turn, Larkin’s presentation of place and space. In so doing, I claim that the ambivalence of opinion Larkin upholds towards “elsewhere” – both in real life and in his poetry – is no reason to assume that his poems are not cognizant with, critical of, or – at the very least – analogous with contemporary and pre-existing French notions of place and travel. Therefore, I argue that Larkin did not so much abscond from critical discourses of the time, but rather situated himself covertly within them, allowing him to engage freely with contemporaneous (and pre-existing) discourses connected with travel, movement, and their presentation in art.

I wish to start our discussion by looking at one of the more energetic poems in *The Less Deceived*, with particular focus upon the way in which notions of travel are imagined, rendered and subverted. ‘Poetry of Departures’ was completed by the end of January 1954 and consists of four stanzas each

his first drive cited above: ‘I found it petrifying, not being able to speak to anyone or read anything, frightening notices that you felt you should understand and couldn’t’ (21)

⁷‘Foreign poetry? No!’ from Ian Hamilton’s ‘Four Conversations’ *London Magazine* vol. 4 no. 8, 1964, and collected in *FR* p. 25

comprised of eight lines. The narrator commences in an almost jocular tone, meditating on a colloquial piece of reported speech: ‘*He chucked up everything / And just cleared off.*’ Over the next two stanzas, Larkin’s narrator evokes his own cravings, and suspicions of the ‘purifying, / Elemental move’ that such a dramatic exit from daily existence would afford. Eventually the suspicion wins out, and in a typical Larkin turn, one gets the impression that fantasising about such an exodus offers just as much satisfaction, if not more, than undertaking the physical act itself.⁸ Consequently, the narrator does not walk out on his humdrum daily responsibilities; instead, he wallows in the conceptual space of a fantasised, *potential* journey. Like other poems in the collection – notably ‘Lines’ and ‘Absences’, where the narrator envisages an ‘attic’ and a secular ‘heaven’ respectively – the imagined space is both unpeopled and unpoliced; an almost bordello-like environment of unchecked pleasure in which the narrator can indulge the auto-erotic and auto-sensuous desires of the self. Unsurprisingly, the final two stanzas evoke an image of the wandering Lothario, whose quest for fulfilment is knowingly undermined by the very stereotype that it confers on the artistic world:

So to hear it said
He walked out on the whole crowd
Leaves me flushed and stirred,
Like Then she undid her dress
Or Take that you bastard;
Surely I can, if he did?
And that helps me stay
Sober and industrious.
But I’d go today,

Yes, swagger the nut-strewn roads,
Crouch in the fo’c’sle
Stubbly with goodness, if
It weren’t so artificial,
Such a deliberate step backwards
To create an object:
Books; china; a life
Reprehensibly perfect.

(CP 64)

These final two stanzas express more than a mere meditation upon the phenomena of travel: in addition to this, between the penultimate and final stanza, one recognises the queasy undertones of a thwarted sexual response cycle. Rather than deriving arousal, as one might expect of Larkin, from the Chatterley-esque literary portrayal of nudity, ‘*And then she undid her dress*’, the narrator instead recruits this instance as a simile for the *actual* source of arousal, the ‘walk[ing] out’. It is from this description of walking out that the narrator becomes ‘flushed and stirred’ – two verbs that are reflective of orgasm and arousal respectively. It is only in the second instance that he compares this feeling to the denuded Romantic muse, and the jealousy-induced punch-up whose subject – either male or female – is robbed of an identity. The thought of travel plays two roles: it fields the unsavoury sexuality of the poetic subject while, lexically speaking, renders the actual gender of Larkin’s punch victim unclear. Like ‘Deceptions’ which precedes it, Larkin mires his own preoccupation with sex and violence in a semantic kinesis which, itself, is highly evocative of landscape and movement. The ‘stalks, he made you gulp’ in ‘Deceptions’ might be read as the equivalent apotheosis of Larkin’s equivocally-rendered fixation with sex and violence, and repeats the same imagery of the newly harvested field ‘stubbly with goodness’, inserting a comma between ‘stalks’ (the phallus) and ‘he’ (the violator) to potentially separate subject and object into two separate clauses. To linger at the juncture, for Larkin, is to rally the full force of poetic expertise to blur, and potentially conceal, the sexual deviousness which lurks beneath. The use of italics in the poem constitutes another instance of wily syntactical play, partly dissolving the certainty that the voice is that of an undisclosed persona and not Larkin-the-Man himself; a move which, in turn, softens the unpleasant suggestion of violent

⁸Larkin’s preference, throughout much of his life, for autoeroticism over shared sexual congress is well documented and described particularly well in *TPP* 69 and *LAL* 285 as well as, more broadly, by Freeman.

copycatting in the line ‘Surely I can, if he did?’ In a sense, Andrew Motion noticed this arrival of subtle lexical play in *The Less Deceived* in his comment that, in poems like ‘Poetry of Departures’, ‘Toads’ and ‘Born Yesterday’, Larkin stopped seeing his ‘feelings of exclusion [as] something which must be resolved, and regarded [them] instead as means of self-definition’ (AWL 237). Blake Morrison develops the idea further, touching on Larkin’s use of equivocation to cloud the endorsement of devious sexual politics in his statement that *The Less Deceived* possesses ‘a rather strained element of self-consoling.’⁹ Both critics’ focus on the hardship felt by Larkin – an understandable approach given the glib quality of its surface-level jocularly employed to conceal, or at least obfuscate, the narrator’s restrained desires.

It is in the final stanza that Larkin’s fantasy eventually concedes the image of the idle adventurer and stroller. In many ways, the scene evokes spatially the same frisson of sexual possibility that the preceding stanza evokes lexically. The Lothario or ‘stereotypical Hollywood rebel’, walks a seemingly endless road, fecund in its ‘nut-strewn’ scattered harvest, in a manner that recalls agricultural themes of Virgil’s *Georgics* or Aeneas’s wanderings in the *Aeneid*¹⁰ (LAL 190). The scene then dioramas to the image of a stowaway, squatting in the foredeck of a boat again, ‘Stubby with goodness’. Larkin’s choice to use the syncope ‘fo’c’sle’ rather than the writing ‘forecastle’ both aligns itself with the pararhyme of the stanza which straddle alternate lines, (‘fo’c’sle / artificial; goodness / backwards; object / perfect’), but also mimics the more edgy, quipped idiolect of ‘adolescent adventurism’ (Bradford *FBTF* 116). The furtive image of the crouching stowaway is an antithesis of the preceding image of the proud, virile path-treading adventurer. It is voyeuristic and its arrival in the narrator’s daydreaming mind, rather than in reality, once again betrays a need in the narrator for unhindered access to the permissive, albeit conceptual, space of unpoliced auto-eroticism. It anticipates the ‘Peeping . . . Tom’ in Larkin’s *Gravy Train* parody, ‘A Midland Syllogism’ penned two years later in 1956, and its inclusion alongside agricultural imagery evokes the anthropomorphised steam train (‘The local [that] snivels through the fields’) in another poem in the parody collection (qtd. in Osborne 145). In both instances, by projecting himself through sexual fantasy into spaces of the mind, the narrator is, to borrow Booth’s reading of ‘Absences’, ‘rapt out of himself by the idea of a place beyond human observation’ (LAL 159).

Booth is not the first to succumb to the mystique surrounding the lusty traveller in ‘Poetry of Departures’. Barbara Everett, in 1980, writes that the title alone ‘refers to a whole phase of French Symbolist verse with a kind of ironic casualness’ (236). Indeed, the chimera-bearing travellers described at the opening of Baudelaire’s ‘ChacunsaChimère’ bear no small resemblance to the existential inchoateness of Larkin’s narrator and his barren surroundings, while echoing, simultaneously, the plaintive despair of the narrator of ‘Going’ mourning the loss of their reciprocity with the surrounding landscape¹¹:

Sous un grand cielgris, dansunegrandeplainepoundreuse, sans chemins, sans gazon, sans un chardon, sans uneortie, jerencontraieurs hommes qui marchaientcourbés. Chacun d’euxportait sur son dos uneénormeChimère, aussilourdequ’un sac de farineou de charbon, ou le fourniment d’un fantassinromain.¹²

Like Larkin’s ‘nut-strewn road’, the Godot-like desolation of Baudelaire’s environment juxtaposes the great burden that exists on the traveller’s shoulders. Both sets of travellers are embarking on a journey with an undisclosed end-point and seem to bear a burden – in Larkin’s case, the sexual affliction of voyeurism; in Baudelaire’s the supernatural clinging chimera – from which they have no real desire to be freed. Both are bent on completing the journey, and this *yearning for completeness* itself seems to confer a sense of satiated desire. The journey *itself*, is the aim, and Larkin craves its open-ended freedom. The final five lines of the poem sees the narrator checking his own susceptibility to be carried away within his own conceptualisation of unfettered adventure. The imagined journey, in

⁹ Stated in a personal correspondence to Motion on 17th March 1992, and quoted in *Such Deliberate Disguises*, p130.

¹⁰ ‘Wandered the airy plain and viewed it all’ Trans. Robert Fitzgerald, 1984, 1203-1210

¹¹ ‘Where has the tree gone, that locked / Earth to sky?’ (CP 51).

¹² Translation: ‘Under a vast grey sky, on a vast and dusty plain without paths, without grass, without a nettle or a thistle, I came upon several men bent double as they walked. Each one carried on his back an enormous Chimera as heavy as a sack of flour, as a sack of coal, as the accoutrement of a Roman foot-soldier.’

which unpoliced desires may rend newfound sexual freedoms, collapses into a sharp image of Larkin’s bedroom and the humdrum banality ‘books; china’. The world it confirms, unlike the imagined journey, is one in which the essence of Larkin’s character is immediately quantifiable through *objects* – the ‘books; china . . . [the] specially chosen junk’ . . . The good book, the good bed’. As such, it is ‘reprehensibly perfect’ not simply because it is the perfect time-accrued collateral of the narrator’s desires and will, but because – in its mere *physicality* – it fails to account for the narrator’s own need, or indeed ‘space’, for sexual expression. This is compounded by the fact that such “perfection” is only accredited on account of its summation of the narrator’s *past* character, not his undisclosed desires for present and future actions, whose expression are censored in *real life*, forced them to achieve expression only in the form of a highly conceptual and codified *poetic* image of aimless travel. Thus, the poem concludes with a resurfacing of the sardonic image of Larkin-the-Man; stubbornly conservative and resistant to change, while reasserting that such a persona only endures on account of the small moments of imaginative escapism, and dreamed journeys, that the persona engages in to re-affirm their own sense of freedom.

While the journey in ‘Poetry of Departures’ remains analogous with ‘ChacunsaChimère’ solely in terms of its scenery and the atmosphere of existentialism that exudes from it, Larkin’s persona bears a much more explicit similarity with the archetypal *flâneur* in Baudelaire’s prose piece ‘The Painter of Modern Life’. In this essay, Baudelaire outlines the characteristics of the *flâneur* through a description of the fictitious ‘Monsieur G’;

For the perfect *flâneur* [...] it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite. To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; [...] The spectator is a *prince* who everywhere rejoices in his incognito . . . [T]he lover of the fair sex who builds up his family from all the beautiful women that he has ever found, or that are – or are not – to be found [...] He is an ‘I’ with an insatiable appetite for the ‘non-I’, at every instant rendering and explaining it in pictures more living than life itself, which is always unstable and fugitive’

(10; emphasis Baudelaire’s).

The description details many of the visual aspects, but also the intellectual qualities, thought processes and desires that Larkin evokes in the latter half of ‘Poetry of Departures’. Indeed, the *flâneur*’s need ‘to be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home’ is, in many ways, the very paradox that forces the narrator’s fantasy to collapse. Baudelaire’s citation is shot through with a queasy sense of scopophilic sexuality, whose gender configuration aligns the male as a constant observer over the female. That the *flâneur* is ‘incognito’, with a desire that is equally satiated by ‘beautiful women’ who both ‘are – or are not – to be found’, dissolves any sense of agency attributable to the female, instead loading the *flâneur* with a kind of hyper-subjectivity and freedom. Although the ‘ebb and flow of movement’ is perhaps more indicative of an urban environment, the conflation of nouns ‘fugitive’ and ‘infinite’ definitively point to the desolate expanse of Larkin’s ‘nut-strewn’ road and its narrator fleeing their everyday responsibilities. In this space, the ‘insatiable appetite for the non-I’ evokes the *flâneur*’s fraternisation with multiple selves, all of which are capable of achieving simultaneous life in the ‘unstable and fugitive’ world of the landscape upon which the *flâneur* maintains complete anonymity. The last sentence of Baudelaire’s citation, in many ways, aligns itself to the very authorial *intent* in Larkin’s poem: like the *flâneur*, the narrator fails to physically enact his escapism, but instead resorts to ‘explaining it in pictures’; pictures which, given their momentary flicker across the text, are themselves ‘unstable and fugitive’ and stand the best chance of conveying the experience of multiple selves.

I wish now to address the autobiographical fragment which deals with Larkin’s arrival in Belfast, to examine briefly ‘Arrivals, Departures’, and direct our exploration away from the traveller’s interest in imagined departures *per se* and look instead at their portrayal of the moment of arrival. I have already acceded, before now, to Barbara Everett’s argument that ‘Arrival, Departures’ is ‘a beautiful imitation [...] of Baudelaire’s prose-poem ‘Le Port’; however, neither Everett, nor Regan later in 1997, fully unpacked the full set of implications such a connection might exert upon the poem’s imagery and style. The poem, first published in *The Fantasy Poets* in March 1954¹³, is cited in full below:

¹³ As cited in *TCP* 388.

Arrivals, Departures

This town has docks where channel boats come sidling;
Tame water lanes, tall sheds, the traveller sees
(His bag of samples knocking at his knees),
And hears, still under slackened engines gliding,
His advent blurred to the morning shore.

And we, barely recalled from sleep there, sense
Arrivals lowing in a doleful distance –
Horny dilemmas at the gate once more.
Come and choose wrong, they cry, come and choose wrong;
And so we rise. At night again they sound,

Calling the traveller now, the outward bound:
Oh not for long, they cry, Oh not for long –
And we are nudged from comfort, never knowing
How safely we may disregard their blowing,
Or if, this night, happiness too is going.

(CP 74)

Unlike ‘Poetry of Departures’, the subject of the poem is deeply obfuscated, and their place in time – though indicated grammatically as the *present* – is mired with a certain temporal ambiguity. Indeed, rather than use first person narration in the first stanza, Larkin instead adopts the third person ostensibly to *distract* the reader’s attention away from an individual’s subjective account, and instead focuses on the experience of ‘arriving’ itself. By reading what ‘the traveller sees . . . /And hears’, Larkin, in one sense, universalises an experience which – through its various *topoi* of ‘water lanes, tall sheds’ and ‘sidling’ channel boats – appears (somewhat paradoxically) to depict a *specific* place. The second stanza opens by compounding this notion: ‘we . . . *sense* / Arrivals lowing in a doleful distance.’ The introduction of the pronoun ‘we’ at the very outset of the second stanza, reincarnates the narrator figure, thus lurching the reader back into the familiar Larkinian territory of a conspicuous, ‘front-facing’ narrator. Formally, the ABBA; CDDC (etc.) rhyme scheme endures, and prohibits the semantics from clotting around this unorthodox perspective change. The ‘doleful distance’ segues into the affirmation that ‘Horny dilemmas [are] at the gate once more’. Situated perfectly in the centre of the poem the line absorbs, and embodies, much of the poem’s ambivalence of mood, perspective and place while simultaneously embroidering within it an encoded sexual message. Like the furtively observant traveller in ‘Poetry of Departures’, the phrase ‘Horny dilemmas’ ramifies beyond a mere *in situ* instance of lexical punning; indeed, it actively describes the cossetted sense of sexual indecision that inhabits the narrator’s will. Given this, the ‘*come and choose wrong*’ refrain stands as a response, articulated in free indirect discourse, to this hinted desire for anonymous sexual consummation. Unlike ‘Poetry of Departures’ in which the sexual moment is depicted as autoerotic and voyeuristic, in ‘Arrivals, Departures’, the ‘Horny dilemmas’ themselves become the chimeras baying for consummation.¹⁴ The narrator desires, and is simultaneously fearful of, a holiday romance; a sexual event whose enactment upon territory that is, symbolically and geographically, not his would yield the paradoxical concoction of alienation and freedom for which his fractured subjectivity perpetually craves. The final stanza reaffirms this, with the ‘Horny dilemmas’ bidding a wistful farewell to the adumbral traveller, leaving them to ponder ‘how safely we may disregard their blowing’; a statement which inscribes a lingering sense of foreboding at the narrator’s seeming inability to wholeheartedly accept or reject the call of the ‘Horny dilemma’. The obfuscation, and slippage, between a city’s exhortation for sex, and its visitor’s own desire for it, is described neatly in Italo Calvino’s *flâneur*-like evocation of the city of Anastasia in *Invisible Cities*. Like the nameless city in ‘Arrivals, Departures’ one feels that the *genius loci* of Anastasia itself is at once malevolent and coercive upon the vulnerable and sexually frustrated traveller:

Anastasia awakens desires one at a time only to force you to stifle them. The city appears to you as a whole where no desire is lost and of which you are a part . . . Such is the power,

¹⁴ The cry recalls the deceitful call of Rossetti’s goblins in ‘Goblin Market’ to the innocent impressionable Laura: ‘Sweet to tongue and sound to eye; / Come buy, come buy’ (lines 1130-1131).

sometimes called malignant, sometimes benign, that Anastasia, the treacherous city possesses . . . and you believe you are enjoying Anastasia wholly when you are only its slave’ (10).

At the heart of Calvino’s musing on Anastasia is a paradox: the traveller, while by definition free to roam, becomes captive in the city, along with their desires. In ‘Arrivals, Departures’, Larkin injects a life of its own into this ‘malignant’ captivating force, as the disembodied beckoning call of the ‘Horny dilemma’. More than simply a crisis of sexual self-realisation, Calvino, like Larkin, opens out the existential entrapment to afflict the narrator’s entire character: Larkin questions whether ‘happiness, too, is going’, while Calvino acknowledges the traveller’s consequent diminution to ‘slave’ status. Ultimately, the cities stall the narrators’ desires by mirroring them within a context of alien notions and voices all of which jar the process of emotional reciprocity, and which, in turn, preclude them from attaining sexual assertiveness and fulfilment. Thus, desire becomes the very agent by which freedom, paradoxically, becomes its own mechanism of entrapment. I do not wish to state that Larkin directly anticipated Calvino in ‘Arrivals, Departures’, merely that I believe the intensely coterminous nature of their theoretical standpoints on place and travel is noteworthy, and possibly betrays an affiliation that might not have been formally accounted for amongst the relatively limited coverage offered by Everett, Thwaite and Booth regarding Larkin’s European influences.

‘Arrivals, Departures’ is not a peregrination; its obfuscation of voices and tones aligns it much more to the category of a philosophical imagining. Much like ‘Absences’ before it, one feels that its composition was a response to Larkin’s being ‘thrilled by the thought of what places look like when I am not there’. That the narrator is the actual traveller, the imagined traveller, a local or an omniscient observer of all three, is rendered deliberately unclear; instead the poem appears to constitute Larkin’s fantasy to harness the travel experience sexually, while encoding within it, at the same time, those very features of place that both encourage, and simultaneously thwart, that sexual fulfilment. Shortly, I wish to discuss ‘The Whitsun Weddings’, a poem in which, unlike the poems hitherto discussed, the narrator is depicted as flagrantly present within the very journey he is recounting. Its occurrence, some 12 poems into *The Whitsun Weddings*, demarcates the apotheosis of Larkin’s sharpened interest in the *physicality* of travel; a shift which, while not existing in a negative correlation with a reduced interest in *imagined* journeys, seems to elevate, nevertheless, the verisimilitude of place to a greater prominence in the collection. ‘Elsewhere’ becomes the eponymous ‘Sunny Prestatyn’; the rush ‘to catch my Comet / One dark November day’ (‘Naturally The Foundation Will Bear Your Expenses’); the ‘furnace-glare of Sheffield, where I change, / And ate an awful pie’ (‘Dockery and Son’); and, of course, ‘the river’s level drifting breadth . . . / Where sky and Lincolnshire and water meet’ (‘The Whitsun Weddings’). The emerging frisson with adventure is not, as is often the case, justified and elucidated in Larkin’s own prose commentary; rather, it is smuggled in as an axiomatic line within the very collection in which his new interest is demonstrated: in the ironically titled ‘Reference Back’, the narrator states, with an almost epitaphic boldness, ‘We are not suited to the long perspectives’. The line aphorises what the collection’s travel poems do *in praxis*: the cherished ‘kodak-distant’ mode of hyper-subjectivity with which past places were frequently imbued in *The Less Deceived* is directly problematised in a seeming apostrophe by Larkin-the-Man. Indeed, rather than encapsulate desirous past forms ‘like a heaven’ (‘Lines’), the act of travelling back to the past now affirms regret through the insistence in ‘Reference Back’ that ‘By acting differently we could have kept it so’. This is not to say that Larkin’s new interest in travel came at the cost of a dissolution in his famous need for alienation; rather, as Janice Rossen states, within Britain at least, ‘travelling and staying at home produce different kinds of isolation’ (55). The train is the principle vehicle through which Larkin is able to yield this ‘different kind . . . of isolation’. The train for Larkin is something more than just a setting; it has an expansive effect on Larkin’s perpetual exploration of time and space, and the relationship between the two. As such, it also engenders the formulation of new tropes and images. Indeed, Margaret Kelleher is correct in stating that, ‘Larkin was especially drawn to train travel as a way of developing a poetic perspective’ (25), but more than this, the train for Larkin was, to use Michael Baron’s words, ‘a device which collapses spatial and temporal distances and creates a striking effect of simultaneity and change’ (63). Within this melange, Larkin upholds his *flâneur*-like view of the world. While, indeed, the train’s rapid pace in ‘The Whitsun Weddings’ is at odds with the *flâneur*’s slow tread, the manner in which Larkin *records* the scenes through the carriage window, is uniquely similar to the *modus operandi* of the *flâneur* such that we may,

likened him to a mirror . . . or a kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness, responding to each one of its movements and reproducing the multiplicity of life and the flickering grace of all the

elements of life . . . he absorbs it all pell-mell; and in a few moments the resulting ‘poem’ will be virtually composed

(10-11).

That Baudelaire’s depiction of the *flâneur* is analogous with the poetic sensibility is deeply telling. Both artists observe, and distil, the maelstrom of life into language from which a ‘poem’ (Baudelaire’s quotation marks) invariably results. However, rather than adhering to Wordsworth’s Romantic dictum of ‘emotion recollected in tranquillity’, the “*flâneur-poet*” appears to eschew recollection, instead positioning their verse as much in the *presence* of the so-called ‘pell-mell’ itself as the verse is capable of being. Indeed, the poem is composed in a mere ‘few moments’ after the *flâneur*’s exposure to the stimulus. The dazzling panoply of this pell-mell is described in the sharply disparate images that jostle for prominence across the page in the second stanza of ‘The Whitsun Weddings’:

Wide farms went by, short-shadowed cattle, and
Canals with floatings of industrial froth;
A hothouse flashed uniquely: hedges dipped
And rose: and now and then a smell of grass
Displaced the reek of buttoned carriage-cloth
Until the next town, new and nondescript,
Approached with acres of dismantled cars.

Like the phantasmagorical series of images in the opening stanza of ‘Here’ that induct readers into *The Whitsun Weddings*, Larkin’s flitting description of all he sees is largely deprived of end stop punctuation, giving the impression that the scenes are stumbling over each other at high speed, in the very manner in which they are being observed in the moment. It is perhaps the eclectic choice of images, as much as their description, that most imparts the proximity to the *flâneur*’s ‘kaleidoscopic’ view from beyond the train’s window. This is underpinned with numerous rhetorical techniques. The opening spondee of ‘**Wide farms**’, against the sibilant ‘**short-shadowed**’ confers a sense of pace, while the juxta-posing of ‘wide’ with ‘short’ tacitly communicates the sheer range of objects being observed. The strobe of the sun-reflecting ‘hothouse’ momentarily compresses the observation to a split-second instance, while the dipping and rising hedges restores an arpeggio-like oscillation of visual stimuli. Within the narrator’s careful enumeration of images, the ‘smell of grass’ displaces the ‘reek of carriage-cloth’ thus invoking a sense of competitiveness to the sensory stimuli, with each scent jostling for prominence within the ‘phantasmagoria’ moment. At the same time, however, the paragraph manages to embody a certain democratising of the stimuli which, when expounded out to the level of theme, seems to confer a sense of competitiveness between the natural and the lived world. The earthy ‘smell of grass’, momentarily eclipses the more perpetual ‘reek of carriage-cloth’, while the similarly bucolic image of the ‘short-shadowed cattle’, is briefly overshadowed by the ‘Canals with floatings of industrial froth’. In the following stanza, the power struggle between the natural and human switches through the aphorised mention that ‘sun destroys / The interest of what’s happening in the shade’. Resultantly, we learn that ‘the whoops and skirls’ – the evidential manifestation, and consequence of, the institution of marriage – are ‘At first’ vanquished through the sun’s brightness. On such occasions, the reader is reminded of the determinedly empirical mode by which Larkin perceives his surroundings, with all cognitive meditation seeming to originate from an initial instance of sensory observation. This highly poised sensory alertness is arguably enabled via the receptiveness generated as a result of the narrator’s almost dandy-like lackadaisicalness: the opulent, hot-cushioned train carriage is ‘three-quarters-empty’, and the narrator’s tardy arrival at the station – (he was ‘late getting away’, with ‘all sense / Of being in a hurry gone’) – projects an untypically relaxed image of Larkin-the-Man. This not only marks a stark contrast with the more ‘pursed-up’ narrators of similar “wandering” poems¹⁵, but, more significantly, suggests that a variation exists across the personae of the travel poems with ‘The Whitsun Weddings’ narrator existing as a pale shadow of ‘Arrivals, Departures’ anxious day-tripper. Indeed, rather than exhort his

¹⁵ From ‘Spring’ (*The Less Deceived*); ‘and me / Threading my pursed-up way across the park’. The poem locates its speaker amidst the hubbub of an urban park. His *flâneur*-like wander through the scene, is strongly subverted with a sudden focus on the narrator’s own deeply restrained demeanour; an antithetical persona to the free-moving, free-thinking persona required of the *flâneur*.

usual preference for asocial poetic stimuli, the narrator of ‘The Whitsun Weddings’, in spite of himself, seems to amalgamate the humanity around him together with the very institution of marriage, which will later become the focus of gentle mockery. The pronoun ‘I’ becomes ‘We’ in a shift away from narrative autonomy which would, on other occasions, seem wholly abhorrent for Larkin. As a result, the narrator seems to quietly confide upon the reader his begrudging acceptance that he – in his role as a mere spectator – is also, in a sense, a guest at the wedding event, much like the shunned ‘fathers’ and their ‘seamy foreheads’ with whom he shares no small physiognomic similarity. His vilification of marriage, while apparent, is delivered lexically and, in so doing, appears to work in the opposite direction to his personal subsumption into the crowd: the indicting ‘religious wounding’ of marriage is quickly softened through the communal spirit inculcated in the jubilant ‘We hurried towards London’, while the ‘happy funeral’ secrets shared by the women, and ‘frown[ing]’ bored children have their sadness diluted through Larkin’s warm, reaffirmation of communal spirit conveyed in the deliberately amphibolic phrase ‘we moved’.

In the penultimate stanza, a vignette appears in which the narrator suddenly returns to his earlier enumeration of line-side content: ‘– An Odeon went past, a cooling tower, / And someone running to bowl –’. The sharp set of descriptions, isolated conspicuously between hyphens, re-positions the reader back into the kinetic “now-ness” of the poem. Abruptly, the evocativeness of train travel is vibrantly re-imagined with excruciating lexical and imagistic efficiency. Through the three scenes described – an Odeon, a cooling tower, and bowling scene – Larkin evokes the entire gamut of common rail-side vistas that one might expect to see in Britain, depicting popular culture, industry and community in turn. As a result, this hyphen-separated closure appears almost to constitute a miniature panegyric – a sudden centrifugal conflation of several quintessential images of late-1950’s British life. Simultaneously, the fusion of all three “snapshots” reiterates the kaleidoscope-like panoply of stimuli experienced by the *flâneur*, without compromising the narrator’s newfound commitment to democratising his narration through an unusual self-enrolment into a wholly *communal* event. Indeed, the snapshots pass through the stanza quickly with the speed and lurching motion of the train itself, seguing into a meditation on London at which ‘we were aimed’, and towards which ‘we raced across / Bright knots of rail’ (emphasis mine). Tony Judt excellently describes the railway’s unique ability to recalibrate the relationship away from the self-centred and towards the social in an otherwise private individual. His critique is homologous with ‘The Whitsun Wedding’s momentary abandonment of the arch disdain and remove that so characterises the personae in much of Larkin’s oeuvre. Judt states:

The railways [are] a collective project for individual benefit. They cannot exist without common accord . . . and offer a practical benefit to individual and collectivity alike. [We] have become gated individuals who don’t know how to share public space to common advantage . . . It would mean we had done with modern life’ (emphasis Judt’s).

Judt’s gloomy vision of the impending collapse of ‘modern life’ anticipates – intertextually – Larkin’s sharpened denunciation of modern Britain in *High Windows*; an agenda that is already prototypically laid out and glimpsed in ‘Here’s bargain-hungry ‘cut-price crowd’. Interestingly, Judt’s critique of the railway’s capacity for prompting social fluidity does not eschew *all* sense of the individual; rather, he incorporates one concept within the other. The railways are ‘a collective project’ *within which* the ‘projects’ – that is to say the subjective agenda – of the individual are contained. Thus, railways foster the interests of the individual *by way of* the communal, thereby benefitting both in a kind of symbiosis. Contrary to his pervasively individualistic nature, Larkin, as Judt ascribes, appears to lay aside his peevish nature in order to profit from the railway’s ability ‘to be socially responsive’, so much so that the railway’s “socialising” effect is felt not only at a lexical level but, more profoundly, at the level of narration and voice. More than simply a means of governing poetic content, Larkin, in becoming the unwitting subject of social pluralism, engendered by the phenomenon of railway travel, actively uses the railway to confirm, and in many ways *update*, the *flâneur*’s method of societal observation. Indeed, Larkin’s observation of society and – more particularly – his ‘Thought of the others they would never meet / Or how their lives would all contain this hour’, bestows upon him an almost identikit persona of *flânerie*, given that ‘he is the painter of the passing moment and of all the suggestions of eternity it contains’ (Baudelaire 5). Resultantly, it is no surprise that the poem ends on an image of high-Baudelairian symbolism: the ‘sense of falling, like an arrow-shower / Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain’. This teetering conclusion is affirmed by Hans Osterwalder as ‘the

most salient example [of the] symbolic mode’ in Larkin’s oeuvre, while Jason Harding develops the affirmation arguing that the poem is a ‘symbolic apprehension of regenerative processes’ (90; 362). While Harding understandably attributes this sense of ‘regeneration’ to the reoccurrence of life anticipated upon the marriage’s consummation, there is also a secondway in which ‘regeneration’ might be seen to underscore the poem’s agenda: Larkin is regenerating a proto-modernist instance of symbolism within the comfortable, unpressured context of modernism’s recession. In this sense, he is finishing the work that Baudelaire started. The latter part of the 19th century was, according to Friedberg, ‘a “frenzy of the visible”’ (xi) with railways appearing to propagate a disturbing new ‘annihilation of space and time’ (Pecqueur qtd. in Schivelbusch 31). Furthermore, the railway’s new capacity to offer an ‘extension to the field of the visible’ could neither be uniformly appreciated across class and society, nor celebrated literarily by the artistic milieu (xi). By placing the sharp-eyed *flâneur* aboard the train, Larkin is able to relocate the *flâneur*’s sweeping gaze to behind the railway carriage window; a space which, though firmly established in the cultural mind-set, is newly unfettered by the anxieties and fears that surrounded its arrival during the mid-nineteenth century. Consequently, Larkin’s persona is temporarily communalised while never quite managing to shake off a personal desire to self-alienate; a notion which also arguably, ‘festers at the roots of modernity’ (Friedberg 16).¹⁶

My recent debate has shown that, while interested in the stylistic and thematic potentiality offered by describing both physical and imagined journeys, Larkin is able to use *physical* journeys as a platform to evoke imagined *notions* that sit within the matrix of the poem’s semiotics of language and image. The final poem I wish to address is ‘The Importance of Elsewhere’ which, in many ways, constitutes the summation of different notions of travel and journeying which Larkin deploys within the poems I have hitherto addressed. Out of the poems discussed, ‘The Importance of Elsewhere’ is the penultimate poem that Larkin chose to anthologise in *The Whitsun Weddings*, and arrives at a point during which the poet’s voice lurches towards a sudden and scathing indictment upon England’s impoverished stance towards civic duty and memorialisation. The axiomatic line ‘O when will England grow up?’ in the final stanza of ‘Naturally the Foundation will Bear Your Expenses’, is perhaps the most direct, and critically evaluated instance of such denunciation, with its unflinching scorn aimed at Armistice commemoration in the yearly display of ‘Wreath-rubbish in Whitehall’.¹⁷ ‘Broadcast’ develops the idea, pulling it away from the axiomatic, and into the metonymic with ‘the Queen’ herself embodying England’s ‘Cascades of monumental slithering’ – an ostensible hangover from the Victorian era and its preoccupation with royalty and ceremonial pageantry. Indeed, Larkin’s recognition of England’s injured civic pride goes further still: the ‘awful pie’ consumed at Sheffield station, and ‘Sunny Prestatyn’s ruthlessly defaced Edwardian-esque railway advert, confirms that these instances of post-war deprivation are not mere isolated moments but achieve, collectively, the status of a fully-fledged leitmotif. So far, we have established that Larkin was interested in depicting both physical and conceptual journeys, both for intrinsic aesthetic value but also, on occasion, for the insight they offer into the multifarious operation of the narrator’s subjectivity, and society as a whole. In several ways, ‘The Importance of Elsewhere’ embodies the consolidation of several earlier instances of experimentation relating to the poësis of journeys and, as such, reads with an almost self-conscious air of virtuosity. More significantly, the journey is depicted as *both* a literal journey *and* an opportunity for “journey-centred” phenomenological rumination. It is a physical journey which contains within it, a self-referential acknowledgement of the conceptual forces that instruct its verbalisation. In the poem, the narrator is both a physical (literal) traveller *and* a conceptual

¹⁶ I would not go so far as to suggest, as Harding does, that ‘the social drama of “The Whitsun Weddings”’ – in its presentation of ‘the discomfiture of the alienated intellectual’ – is a ‘poem surprisingly complicit with *The Waste Land*.’ (379). Of all Larkin’s poems, the claim is a little oddly attributed to ‘The Whitsun Weddings’ given that, in this particular poem, Larkin’s typical stance of alienation is side-lined with a rather atypical frisson for social engagement.

¹⁷ Chatterjee connects the moment to Larkin’s problematic relationship with “patriotism”, while Rác reads the moment as a tense, oscillating relationship for and against modernism, through its commingling of war imagery and the adumbration of E. M. Forster, with a veneer of ironic scorn aimed at the academic ‘ivory tower’. Perhaps most compelling is Tijana Stojkovic’s reading which argues for Larkin’s examination of the above through the lexicon of “campus novel” typical of the 1950’s’s. Stojkovic’s argument is also given texture through her astute reading of the imagery of flight (the ‘Comet’ / ‘I was airborne’), thus suggesting Larkin is engaging with these ideas through a position of ironic “aloofness”.

“traveller” – two modes which, in the poems hitherto discussed, rarely exist simultaneously. The narrator is an intradiegetic presence in his own retelling, and is depicted as both an abstract and concrete presence within his foreign locale. Key to rendering such effects is the dexterous application, and interrelation, of lexical and semiotic features. The poem is cited in full below:

The Importance of Elsewhere

Lonely in Ireland, since it was not home,
Strangeness made sense. The salt rebuff of speech,
Insisting so on difference, made me welcome:
Once that was recognised, we were in touch.

Their draughty streets, end-on to hills, the faint
Archaic smell of dockland, like a stable,
The herring-hawker’s cry, dwindling, went
To prove me separate, not unworkable.

Living in England has no such excuse:
These are my customs and establishments
It would be much more serious to refuse.
Here no elsewhere underwrites my existence.

(CP 105)

The poem’s opening sentence is intricately balanced metrically, both at phrase and sentence level. ‘Lonely in Ireland’ and ‘Strangeness made sense’ are both amphimacers, while the sentence as a whole, with its five monosyllabic words between the two amphimacers, is, in itself, a kind of overarching, sentence-long amphimacer. This strict regularity and symmetry counteracts artfully the deep obscurity of the sentence’s meaning. ‘Strangeness made sense’ is, in itself, a hypallage: strangeness, by definition, implies an undermining of “sense”. This contrasting of formal regularity with semantic obfuscation carefully shepherds the reader into the elusive realm of phenomenology: one equates themselves with the poet’s “feeling”, despite the realisation that this feeling is rendered in an exclusively subjective realm and, as such, evades practically all attempts of expression. ‘The salt rebuff of speech’ is a highly evocative phrase, which utilises the lexical multifariousness inherent in both ‘salt’ (wit, seafaring, seasoning, pungency etc.) and ‘rebuff’ (blunt, brusque, gruff etc.) to conceptually *merge* the indigenous population with place. Again a hypallage, ‘salt’ is an awkward adjective to connect to ‘speech’ and yet manages, by way of its odd placement, to centrifugally draw the atmosphere and imagism of a foreign seafaring town into the very inhabitants that inhabit it. The narrator feels ‘welcome’, a closeness which, much like in ‘The Whitsun Weddings’ prompts the narrator into an uncharacteristic display of inter-societal connectedness via the pronoun ‘we’. Once again, the narrator feels himself part of a community, and the very means by which this sense of “common” is rendered is deeply singular. The final two words ‘in touch’ are a climactic hypallage to this paradoxical “asocial” act of communal integration: no “touching” is involved, and the solitary narrator is no more at the brink of intimate corporeal proximity than ‘the salt rebuff of speech’ is able to ‘Insist . . . on difference’. Both sets of rhetorical device help delineate Larkin’s curious sense of phenomenological connectedness to this foreign locale as a solitary traveller.

The second stanza departs from the conceptuality of the first stanza, instead engaging in a far more conservative enumeration of spatial *topoi*. Sight (the ‘end-on’ hills), sound (‘herring-hawker’s cry’), and touch (‘draughty streets’) are all described in a manner that, unlike the preceding stanza, is ostensibly stripped of a contrapuntal grammatical or lexical agenda. Consequently, the reader senses a somewhat refreshing lucidity take hold in the verse, lifting it free from the miring ambiguity of subjective mentation. Certain features, particularly the ‘Archaic’ smells of the hill-flanked streets, evoke both the industry and broad, dramatic hillsides of a northern, or coastal town. The faint clamour of the locals’ tongue is ‘dwindling’ – a verb which could relate as much to the ebbing away of a native culture as it could to a dipping lilt of a regional dialect. The combination of both yields an almost unambiguous sense of Ireland. Larkin reminds us, much like Yeats before him, that this foreign sense of nationhood, from which he is paradoxically deriving a connection with his native England, is a nationhood that undertakes, and is perhaps even characterised by, its dialectical relationship with a deeply inchoate mythic heritage; a nation that is, as Heaney puts it, keeping ‘open

the imagination’s supply lines to the past’ (qtd. in Cavanagh 151). Heaney famously lends credence to the poem’s subtle conveyance of a markedly “Irish” set of spatial furnishings, and the enigmatic sense of indigenous nationhood that this confers upon the narrator, in his collections of essays *Preoccupations* stating that in ‘The Importance of Elsewhere’, the narrator ‘[gives] thanks, by implication, for the nurture that he receives by living among his own’. Heaney’s critique is convincing. Ingelbien, more recently, has argued against Heaney’s reading, believing the sense of estrangement that the narrator derives upon arriving in Ireland has nothing to do with Larkin’s well-accounted interest in the Yeatsian mode of celebration of place through its mythic, elusive heritage. Ingelbien instead argues, calling on excruciatingly detailed moments of phonetic parahrime, that the poem ‘actually points back to the 1930’s writings of Cyril Connolly, who had been a major influence on Larkin in his student days’ (474). That Ingelbien believes Larkin’s debt was owed far more to his contemporary post-war, allows him to dramatically claim that Heaney foisted upon Larkin’s writing his own, famed understanding of place poetics. I argue, much like Heaney, that the poem’s central idea, much like poems hitherto discussed, derives from the narrator’s happy willingness to *use* an unknown place to unclog channels of emotional and subjective mentation, that would otherwise be tacitly impeded by the ‘customs and establishments’ of his native England. Far from, as Heaney and Ingelbien imply, making a critique of nationhood the poem’s *raison d’être*, I argue that Larkin uses this new unimpeded mental consciousness to triumphantly reaffirm, once again, his primary poetic interest – namely, the emotional awareness and pleasures of the *self*. The suggestion is that even the simple realisation that he is ‘Living in England’, unburdens the poet, thus showing that the purity of the self – Larkin’s most cherished state of being – can never be *fully* attained in his homeland. Indeed, in his homeland, Larkin will always be quietly encumbered by an assortment of cultural and political factors – his ‘customs and establishments’ as he tersely describes – that, in his view at least, delicately impede his attainment of a complete sense of self.

‘The Importance of Elsewhere’, then, is much more a poem about the individual’s quest for subjective liberation; a level of existence which is – somewhat illogically – both hampered by, and enabled through, place itself. As both a traveller embarking on both a physical *and* imagined journey, Larkin is able to achieve – ostensibly at least – his complete sense of subjective freedom yet. More than the railway journey of ‘The Whitsun Weddings’, where the eponymous weddings impress Britain’s ‘customs and establishments’ upon the narrator in a veritable barrage, or ‘Poetry of Departures’ where the yearning for an unfettered, unpoliced existence is but a hankered-for dream, ‘The Importance of Elsewhere’ demarcates the apotheosis of Larkin’s personal execution into place’s capacity to enact complete subjective liberation. It is little wonder, then, that ‘The Importance of Elsewhere’ tends to be upheld as Larkin’s one and only concerted foray into the tropes of travel and exploration; a belief which, as we have seen, could not be further from the truth.

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Alex has recently submitted his PhD on Philip Larkin’s poetics of place. As well as presenting his research, Alex has undertaken several other roles for the English Literature department. In 2014 he was Research Assistant for AHRC project *Writing the North*, and is also a fiction reader for the James Tait Black Memorial Prize. He currently teaches second year undergraduates.

Alex is also an author and poet. His debut novel *Library Cat* (Black & White) has gone on to be an international bestseller, and has sold rights to Italy (Garzanti), Korea (Woongjin) and France (Éditions Bragelonne). It also won a People’s Book Prize in 2017. His poetry has been published in *The London Magazine*, *Aesthetica* and *Gutter* '09. Alex is grateful to the AHRC for funding his PhD project.

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