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# PHILIP LARKIN'S GRAFFITI POETICS: THE OTHER FACE OF JANUS AND THE WHOLENESS OF RECOGNISED DIVISION

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The present article seeks to prove the relevance of and illustrate the part played by graffiti in the poetry of Philip Larkin, arguing that graffiti, a feature of Larkin's poetry that has not been studied yet, is a major aesthetic principle (together, perhaps, with the jazz mode) and a key strategy in his poetic practice. By graffiti, I mean the casual cynical comment appended to an otherwise 'serious' poem, the ironising remark engrafted upon a lengthy dramatic tirade, the debunking afterthought following upon a self-assured gesture, the deflating hint mocking a too enthusiastic discourse, the flippant postscript tacked on to a lyrical spell. And in all these instances, the appended scribbling has the rawness, unruliness and improvisatory character of fresh graffiti. If jazz (with which Larkin was infatuated, and which the present article intends to consider in relation to improvisation) "is the new art of the unconscious, and is therefore improvised"[1], graffiti, as its counterpart in the written poem, is the raw (rough, unpolished, extempore; stark, sharp, strident; blunt, indecent, 'politically incorrect') spouting of the otherwise 'unsaid', and is therefore improvised.

It is my argument in this article that Larkin has used graffiti as a strategy of release of the 'unsaid', or the 'unsayable", and a way of

(1) Philip Larkin, The Philip Larkin Archive in the Brynmor Jones Library at the University of Hull, autobiographical essay (1943); qtd by Andrew Motion in *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1993), p. 57. (Further references to Andrew Motion's biography will appear in the text, abbreviated *PLWL*).

checking any tendency to be taken in by, or 'disciplined' into, the large rhetorical, romantic, mythical, or social realist gestures and attitudes of his predecessors and contemporaries[2]. Graffiti, as I see it, is the flip-side of the serious, 'physically predominant', declared, authoritative text, both undermining its assumed seriousness and authoritativeness and, paradoxically enough, conferring upon it the authority of 'unruliness' and of an encompassing, 'self-examinatory', division. Neil Corcoran quotes Barbara Everett as having "observed how Larkin sometimes 'fuses... outcry and anecdote'"[3]. This is not only a strategy of "self-defence", as Corcoran seems to argue; nor is it just a strategy of mitigation. It is, as shall be argued, also and above all, a tactic of keeping the outcry in check and, consequently, of creating perspective. Although the approach to Larkin's poetry, as proposed in the present article, tends to make use of bio-data, and is thus prone to the pitfalls of intentional fallacy, it will seek to compensate for any such likely pitfalls by interrogating the text and its language in terms of irony, paradox and ambiguity, as well as by attaching due importance to the "connotations, the feeling tone, the nuances of the poem's words"[4], deriving the overall appreciation of Larkin's poetic output from within, i. e. from the verbal structure of the poetic text, while considering the text as both product and potential. In other words, bio-data (as made available by Larkin's biographer, who is also a speaking voice, as a matter of fact) will be checked against and related to the text as such. Accordingly, part of the task will, incidentally, be to validate the "given" biographical elements by making a case for the "constructed/ construed" textual import.

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(2) In *English Poetry since 1940* (Chapter 4: "A New Romanticism: Apocalypse, Dylan Thomas, W. S. Graham, George Baker"), Neil Corcoran argues that Auden's sailing from England to America in January 1939 and not returning during the war "signalled an endpoint to the politically committed, socially engaged poetry of the English 1930s" (England: Longman Group UK Ltd., 1993), p. 39. Corcoran comments on the change thus: "Known initially as the poetry of the 'Apocalypse', but soon merging into the general movement known as the 'New Romanticism', and culminating in a theory of 'Personalism', it gave the period that character which laid it open to the mockery of the 1950s Movement poets" (p. 40), a process consummated, as shall be illustrated in the present article, in Larkin's poetry.

(3) "Larkin and Dockery: The Limits of the Social"; in George Hartley (ed.), *Philip Larkin 1922-1985*: A Tribute (London: The Marvell Press, 1983), p. 140; qtd by Neil Corcoran, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

(4) Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry.* New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1947), p. 236.

If one were asked to propose just one word to qualify Larkin's personality as emerging from *PLWL*, one would not find a better word perhaps than unconventionality. Andrew Motion tells us how, as a school-boy and student, Larkin indulged in "undergraduate snipings", "writerly vandalism", and "'childish' defacements" of existing texts (*PLWL*, 59), which--according to my argument--may be looked upon as early instances of his practice of graffiti. His school teachers, we are told, thought he was a "lazy and uncommitted undergraduate"; what they did not know, though, "was how enthusiastic Larkin felt about literature which had nothing to do with his set work. While dawdling in public he worked hard in private to broaden his knowledge of writers who lay outside the syllabus" (*PLWL*, 42). And so he devised, together with fellow-undergraduates, a "filthy lingo" (*PLWL*, 50) which they used as a weapon to denigrate and disparage the authors and texts they hated.

Such a practice of snipings, writerly vandalism, defacement or mock-rewriting of so-called serious, established, canonical texts[5], as well as Larkin's pursuit of a self-designed syllabus, are not only asides which are revealing of Larkin's unconscious and his, otherwise, suppressed private dislikes and preferences; they are also significant instances of unruliness and fantasies of attack against academia, education and the canon. In fact, while the game allowed him to let off steam and, thus, served as a means of release of unorthodox views and attitudes his notorious shyness would have prevented him from articulating in public, it also initiated him in the art of irony, derision and mockery (which he scathingly deployed when commenting on whatever he disliked in other peoples' work, as well as when reviewing parts of his own[6]) and, thus, served as a workshop where he sharpened the tools of his critical and poetic practice

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(5) In *PLWL* (59), Motion tells us that "in an essay published to commemorate Larkin's sixtieth birthday, Amis [Kingsley] recalled coming across the following comment by Larkin on the St. John's Library copy of *The Faerie Queene*: "At the foot of the last page of the text he had written in his unmistakable, beautiful, spacious hand:
'First I thought *Troilus and Criseyde* was the most *boring* poem in English. Then I thought *Beowulf* was. Then I thought *Paradise Lost* was. Now I *know* that *The Faerie Queene* is the *dullest thing out. Blast* it'".

(6) See *PLWL* (30) for a series of scathing comments he scribbled on pieces he had himself written in 1939, the least abusing and debunking of which goes: "Case of the fart being greater than the hole...".

and an antechamber where he learnt to question his own assumptions. In other words, the graffiti game was not only of psychological benefit; it was equally of critical, instructive and formative value.

The graffiti game, indeed, constantly weighed up what he was writing and publishing--his text, a declared, public thing--, not only with what he was thinking but not writing--a sub-text which, although apparently subdued and suppressed, still keeps nagging and is allowed to surface as a recognisable other version or counter-truth--, but also with what a 'disillusioned', an incredulous, or a simply mockingly-critical reader would append to the finished text--the reader's shadow text. His ironical, snickering double acted, as it were, as a sparring partner in the writing and critical game: practising with his double called his attention to his own potential insincerity and helped him to anticipate potential 'attacks'. In 1981, four years before his death, he recalls: "Kingsley [Amis] and I used to read other people's poems and seriously planned getting a rubber stamp made--or rather two rubber stamps--, one for each of us--reading 'What does this mean?' and 'What makes you think I care?'[7]" The rubber-stamps game cannot be dismissed as a childish indulgence; it is, indeed, the enactment of an attitude and the implementation of a lasting strategy of systematic questioning of assumptions about the significance and relevance of one's writing and the sincerity of one's attitudes. The abusive stamp-mark which interrogates other writers' assumptions also checks its inventor's or perpetrator's own. After recording a few instances of Larkin's and Amis's writerly vandalism, Andrew Motion comments:

> Amis refers to these things as 'sheer childishness' [Kingsley Amis to author, 24 November 1986], and so they were, in a way. Yet it's impossible to see in them something other than simple high spirits. In their later work, Larkin and Amis develop their undergraduate snipings into a sustained barrage against pomposity.
> Even more important is the way their early desecrations anticipate the structure of much of their subsequent writing, and Amis's writing in particular. Their merely 'childish' defacements create a mocking sub-text below everything that is familiar and respectable..." (*PLWL*: 59).

What needs to be added to Motion's comment above is that, for Larkin, the

(7) From "the unpublished text of an interview with Philip Larkin by Melvyn Bragg for the LWT South Bank Show; interview conducted 16 April 1981" (*PLWL*, 56).

mocking sub-text is not only a barrage against pomposity, or conceit, but is also, and above all, the other half of his personality, that the text and the sub-text combine to reconcile, or to simply juxtapose, contrasting (even, at times, antithetical) bits of experience (slices of life), that the 'main' text and the underlying graffiti voice a necessarily double recognition, and that the poems depend on this for their inclusiveness, balance an truthfulness to actual experience. The Graffiti sub-text thus becomes as 'authoritative' as the declared, public text.

This strategy of playing off the text and sub-text against each other, resulting in what may be called a 'poetry of conversation' or 'a poetry of asides', may be seen clearly at work in three major poems by Philip Larkin which deal with such mainstream topics as work, love, and religion: these are, respectively, "Toads" (and its companion piece, "Toads Revisited"), "An Arundel Tomb" and Church Going". In "Toads", the whimper of the mock-heroic sub-text keeps in check the bang of the pseudo-heroic "stuff your pension!" In "An Arundel Tomb", a comment in the draft version of the poem and scattered hints around the poem's conclusion recall in contrast, belie and undermine the illusive and illusory Grecian-Urn like immortality of the lovers which the 'authoritative', public text is meant to celebrate. In "Church Going", the main body of the poem, and the apparent thrust of the speaker's argument, seem to be geared to an epiphany; but rather than feeling a hunger to be religious, rather than confirming an expected and anticipated religiosity, the speaker only suspects "a hunger in himself to be more serious"--with the "awkward reverence" of the beginning of the poem surfacing at the end of it. (The underlying theatricality of the evolvement of the visit to the Church tethers the merely curious speaker short of coincidental, and merely ceremonial, religious conversion).

Unlike most of his poems about alienation and despair where the possibility to lead a life of freedom and fulfilment is reduced by age, "Toads" is a poem where man's life is reduced by his own failures and inadequacies. The speaker is aware of work as a yoke of subservience, and he feels a prompting to shake it off:

> Why should I let the toad *work*
> Squat on my life?
> Can't I use my wit as a pitchfork
> And drive the brute off?

However, the outcome, which we get as we read on, is not an activation of the prompting but a wish to summon activating powers, with a hint in the interjection that the whole project remains a mere wish: "Ah, were I courageous enough / To shout Stuff your pension!" And, indeed, the enthusiastic bang of the questions and the colloquial, raw "*Stuff your pension!*" is checked and muffled into a 'sobering' whimper which reminds us that work and pension constitute the very 'stuff' (the pun is significant) of which the speaker's life is made. The text--the stirrings of independence, the daring voice of hot-headedness, and the meteoric rhetoric--fades out as the sub-text--the snickering spectre of dependence, the nagging voice that seems to know better, and the verbal tether of restraint--fades in. The romantic, exciting and unpredictable had already been, as it were, and even before the text was contrived, traded for, and is thus cancelled by, the idea of security. Mere posturing and pretence would not do, and the bare facts of life, as well as modern man's inadequacy, mark out the project of breaking loose from the system with the 'rubber stamp'--of mockery, of the sobering recognition embodied in the ironical 'stuff'--as an 'unimplementable' agenda. To shout "*Stuff your pension!*" when you know that the pension is the very 'stuff' of your subsistence indeed invites the comment "case of the fart being greater than the hole!"

The predicament is not just--as Ted Walker claims--that of the Welfare State-man--[8]; it is also that of modern man, in general, who has nailed his life on to a fixed creed: live to work. The work paradox (work as something that prevents man from living) is that dirty toad which man hates, feels a prompting to 'drive off', but is compelled to live with[9]. In "Toads Revisited", which may be read as a companion piece to "Toads" and, in terms of our analysis, rather as a fuller sub-text to it, the conflict, division and paradox are accepted as complementary terms of a fuller definition of modern man. The 'caricatural' graffiti of the conclusive couplet debunking the pseudo-heroic "shout" and "*Stuff your pension!*"--"Give me your arm, old toad;/ Help me down Cemetery road"--confirms

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(8) Cf. Walker's comments on Larkin's "Toads" and "Poetry of Departures" in *Recent Poetry* (Sussex Tapes, 1975). I would like to record here, though, my indebtedness to Walker's insight concerning the idea of security, which I am only expanding.

(9) This recalls to me an older paradox. Talking about money, the Arab poet al-Mutannabi has said "it is an enemy whose friendship I cannot do without".

an underlying, lingering acceptance of a life ruled by the toad that runs alongside the posture and pretence of the pseudo-heroic, 'declared' text of "Toads". Paradoxically enough, by confirming division, the 'postscript' confirms integrity[10].

"An Arundel Tomb" is supposed to celebrate a Grecian-Urn like timeless moment of love. Andrew Motion reminds us that that the monument upon which the poem draws, and which is still preserved in Chichester Cathedral in England, was made in honour of the Earl of Arundel and his wife, and it showed "their two figures lying side by side in state, holding hands" (*PLWL*, 274). In the manuscript draft of the poem, the "stone fidelity" of the couple triumphs over the 'transfiguring' power of time and mutability: "an attitude remains... to prove" that "[w]hat will survive of us is love". And yet, Larkin is aware, even as he erects the rhetoric of the stony fortress of faithfulness--a monument to a monument--, of a lingering doubt as to the very possibility of a permanent and intense love triumphing over time. In the poem, words like "hollow", "suspended", "only" and "hardly" punctuate the celebration, pointing to the frailty of the hand-holding "final blazon". Privately (i.e., in the manuscript draft of the poem, or the sub-text), a bit of ironising graffiti belies the Grecian-Urn rhetoric most ruthlessly, thus offering some form of release to the poet's nagging, incredulous other voice[11].

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(10) Speaking of Larkin's wariness of being committed in matter of friendship and love, Andrew Motion says on Larkin's behalf: "He would, he decided, stay whole by remaining divided" (*PLWL*, 327). In the particular context of "Toads" and "Toads Revisited", however, integrity is not so much a matter of decision or choice as it is a matter of awareness of the two necessarily conflicting sides of the argument, an awareness of the indissolubly mated pair: an irresistible, spontaneously voiced prompting to seek freedom ("shout" and the colloquial "*Stuff your pension!*") and the inescapable, resignedly expressed submission to the inevitable, the realisation that security requires bondage ("Give me your arm, old toad;/ Help me down Cemetery road").

(11) The instance of the sniper's practice is reported by Andrew Motion who informs us that, after his visit to Chichester Cathedral where he saw the "'pre-baroque'" monument, Larkin "discovered that the joined hands were a later addition--in fact the work of Edward Richardson (1812-68) who reworked the sculpture in the 1840s to repair damage it had suffered during the Reformation and the Civil War" (*PLWL*, 274); Motion, then, quotes the last two stanzas of "An Arundel Tomb" and goes on to say:

> At the end of the manuscript draft of 'An Arundel Tomb' Larkin wrote, 'Love isn't stronger than death just because statues hold hands for 600 years'. It's a remark which reinforced, privately, the sense of futility that hovers around the poem's

Thus, by 'desecrating' his own monument about the monument, Larkin displays an awareness that there is as much evidence of death in the effigy--(a truth only reasserted by the irony of the hand that doctered, or 'artefacted', if we may say so, the 'hand-holding'), adding sculpture to sculpture--, as there is assertion of immortality. The graffiti, once again, is irresistible and indispensable: it is irresistible since it has become a habit of systematic questioning of assumptions; it is indispensable as a means of checking inflated rhetorical and myth-making tendencies. The graffiti 'postscript' is an instance of a self-inflicted rubber-stamp vandalism for a purpose: the 'stamping' (or 'punching') marks the assumption as having been questioned and the grand gesture as having been checked, albeit privately. Man will continue, the graffiti seems to imply, to hanker after a timeless and intense love ("Love, all alike, no season knowes nor clyme/ Nor houres, dayes, months, which are the rags of time", John Donne claims in "The Sunne Rising"), and will go on failing to have timelessness and intensity at once (the Romantic predicament). The pointed graffiti debunks the inflated rhetoric by bursting the bubble of wishful thinking and illusion. Ironically enough, the figures on the Grecian Urn will only continue to be together insofar as they do not actually kiss.

The opening lines of "Church Going" offer a rather theatrical description of the attitude of the passing visitor as he comes upon a church: "I take off/ My cycle-clips in awkward reverence". After making sure that "there's nothing going on", the speaker 'steps inside' and goes on to privately survey the place. As he does so, there begins to develop in him a sense of the imposing 'seriousness' of the "house", a seriousness that tends to weigh up the speaker's initial casual reverence. However, the swelling sense of the seriousness of the place, which seems to be geared up for some epiphany, actually leads to no real epiphany in any strictly religious sense, to no instant recognition of a holy message, to no coincidental conversion from curiosity to faith. All that the speaker 'discovers' is "a hunger in himself to

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conclusion in words like 'helpless', 'scrap', 'attitude', 'Untruth' and 'almost' (and it typifies his habit of writing cynical graffiti on his own most monumental lines). Publicly, the rhetoric of the final line ["What will survive of us is love"] takes charge and establishes it as a separate truth: an Augustan wisdom arising from a part-medieval, part nineteenth-century monument. (*PLWL*, 274)

be more serious". What is that authority which inspires the need to "be more serious"? one is entitled to ask. What is the condition or attitude the speaker has to reform: His blank mind? His awkward reverence? His agnosticism?

The answers are supplied by the sub-text that underlies the survey of the holy place: what seems to inspire the need to "be more serious" is not an abstraction; it is the seriousness of the building itself, the authority of an institution that is as much a 'cultural' and 'social' structure as it is an imposing physical architecture, the lasting worldly significance of the weighty matters of life and death that the "house" has always been home to, and that it inspires. The blank mind of the casual visitor is filled with a re-enactment in silence of the immemorial ritual of "marriage, and birth/ And death, and thoughts of these" which the "house" has 'housed'. One ought to look upon such a building 'more seriously'--thus emphasising the "serious" (rather than 'sacred' or 'holy') import of the "house"--not with any strict sense of religious awe, but with a sense of appreciation of, and respect for, the place that preserves the ritual (and is at once preserved by the custom that maintains that ritual) of 'life-related, practical' matters.

The inconclusive closing, suspecting a need for 'more seriousness', is an echo of that awkward reverence of the opening of the text; it is the re-emerging of the sub-text of the 'non-spiritual', 'non-religious', merely curious attitude of the passing visitor whose 'discovery' recalls and recognises the need for a certain 'reverence', a certain respect. And, here again, there are no false postures: the speaker had made sure before stepping into the place that there was 'nothing going on'--that is no sermon, no prayer, no regular mass--; what he 'goes out' with is a sense of the lasting--which results from free intellectual appreciation--, not of the coincidental--which could have resulted from some mediated experience.

The interplay of the thrust of the text with the reminder or echo of the sub-text (or underlying attitude, as embodied in the conversational, deliberative mood), makes it possible to keep in check any tendency to surrender the integrity of the self to the coincidental, to the merely abstract and to the politically correct. And it is not without a certain wisdom--and a great deal of candidness--that Larkin should say: "If I avoid abstractions such as are found in politics and religion it's because they have never affected me strongly enough to become part of my

personal life, and so cease being abstractions."[12] Thus, if the building in "Church Going" seems to have come to gather any significance for the speaker, it is mainly because he has approached the holy place as an institution closely connected with matters of life and death, not as an abstraction about holy matters in general. The theatrical, comic, merely curious attitude underlying the 'serious', 'declared' text guards against any surrender that would dump a division that is part of self-definition.

Commenting on Larkin's fourth poetry collection entitled *High Windows* and published in 1971, Robert Lowell has said (in a letter to Larkin, dated 12 June 1974): "all the poetry is in the last lines.... I think you resemble Graves and maybe Auden at times, but the poet I most think of still is Herbert--elegance and homeliness." (*PLWL*, 430) The perceptiveness of Lowell's reading of the poems in the collection shows not only in his pointing out the all-important relevance of the last lines as encapsulating the gist of the poetry, but also in sensing a close connection with Herbert. These remarks, however, need to be complemented with the observation that, though they mark the twist upon which the argument in the poem hinges, and on which it depends for its comprehensiveness, the endings should be seen as the surfacing of some 'suppressed'/ 'unauthorised'/ politically incorrect, deliberately half-muted, half-subdued discourse (and emerging, as it were, 'with a vengeance')--that is the other side of the argument, or of consciousness.

As to the connection with George Herbert, the seventeenth-century English poet, one would add that, while it is true that the main body of a Herbertian poem may run against its conclusion (and that, thus, the argument is never complete until the final twist in the main argument is consummated, which often resolves confrontation and conflict in convergence--and 'conversion'--, as in "The Collar")[13], that is turning rebellion

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(12) Philip Larkin, script for 'Younger British Poets of Today' (BBC radio, 20 August 1958); qtd. in *PLWL*, 285.

(13) Herbert's "The Collar" opens with the big bangs of a vigorous protest against the stifling "collar" of rigorous religious discipline: "I struck the board, and cry'd, No more./ I will abroad." Yet, it takes the Father a word to silence the 'raving' and raging Child and call him to order:

But as I rav'd and grew more fierce and wilde
    At every word,

into recognition of an authority acting behind the scenes, the closings of Larkin's poems bring the poem's argument to a close-up on divergence, that is the admission of the authority of division. There is in Larkin's closing turns, indeed, something rather reminiscent of the lingering doubts, abiding uncertainty and unresolved tension characteristic of the endings or closures of Donne's Holy Sonnets and of the interplay of voices prevailing in Donne's conversational, dramatic, or deliberative mode.

In a poem entitled "Reasons for Attendance", and one that is reminiscent of the debate taking place in the head of the persona in Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", the speaker looks through the window to watch a group of dancers in a room (the speaker in Eliot's poem debates whether to go up the stair and join/ talk to the women who "come and go/ Talking of Michelangelo"). Larkin's speaker studies the situation and finds that his preference is to remain outside; his pre-conclusion is that he is satisfied with his being out there (his pursuit is art, a solitary pursuit), and that the others are satisfied with their being in there (their pursuit is sex, a couple's pursuit):

Why be out there?
But then, why be in there? Sex, yes, but what
Is sex? Surely, to think the lion's share
Of happiness is found by couples--sheer

Inaccuracy, as far I'm concerned.
What calls me is that lifted, rough-tongued bell
(Art, if you like) whose individual sound
Insists I too am individual....

Therefore I stay outside,
Believing this; and they maul to and fro,
Believing that; and both are satisfied,
If no one has misjudged himself. Or lied.

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Me thought I heard one calling, *Child*!
And I reply'd, *My Lord*.

And although one might argue that the call and reply which close the poem do not invalidate the questionings of the body of the poem, still the last word to be said is restoration (to order and harmony, as illustrated by the rhyme pattern), conversion (back to the fold, religiously), and submission (to the authority of the One, personally). Thus, we may say that while Herbert's endings represent a way out of the argument, Larkin's represent a way back into the argument and that, in this way, they are more Donnian than Herbertian.

The last line--the conclusion--, however, comes with that familiar twist in a Larkin's argument, here a nagging doubt that questions the assuredness of "sheer inaccuracy" and the 'logical' deduction announced by "therefore". In *Nine Contemporary Poets: A Critical Introduction*, P. R. King quotes the passage above and comments:

> Although the dedication of his art is insisted upon, the final words make it clear there is no room for self-congratulation. Larkin is aware that even this commitment of his may finally be as much an illusion and self-deception as those he exposes elsewhere in so many of his poems. Larkin seems anxious not to be taken in even by his own commitments[14].

There is one commitment, though, which he holds fast to: it is to allow the other voice (sobering, doubtful, incredulous...) to speak out.

Before concluding this article on Larkin's use of graffiti as counterpoint and counterpoise, it would be of relevance to our subject to say a few words about the jazz-connection referred to in this article's introductory paragraph; after all, both graffiti and jazz may be said to express a consciousness that is two-layered. In the Introduction to his book *All What Jazz: A Record Diary 1961-68*, Larkin tells us that jazz gave him a "unique private excitement"[15]. The book brought together contributions by Larkin to a jazz column in the Telegraph, and there the qualities associated with the music and musicians meet in such adjectives and phrases as 'hard-hitting (Pee Wee Russel), 'throbbing cantabile' and 'authoritative vitality' (Sidney Bechet), 'the hottest record ever made... By the third chorus the whole building seems to bemoving' (Louis Armstrong's 'St Louis Blues')[16]. His statements on what the music meant for him and his references to the qualities he appreciated most confirm, indeed, the qualities he has sought to achieve in his poetry: strong emotions 'throbbing' and 'hard-hitting', 'hot' beats that sound the wildest recesses of the psyche and voice them in seemingly unco-ordinated, yet contrapuntally arranged, movements: a horizontal movement--which is the regular beat or, call it the flow of the declared text--, and a vertical movement--which is the solo burst, or emergence of the underlying (snickering, or nagging) sub-text. Jazz and

(14) (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1979), p. 5.
(15) (London: Faber, 1970), p. 15; qtd. in *PLWL*, 397.
(16) *All What Jazz*, pp. 156 62/139 and 200, respectively; in *PLWL*, 398.

graffiti meet in the fulfilment of a wish Larkin expressed, in the form of prayer or, perhaps, tentative manifesto or project, very early in his life (at the age of twenty three) and in his poetic career (in *The North Ship* (1945), his first poetry collection, poem "IX"): "Let me become an instrument sharply stringed/ For all things to strike music as they please".

What jazz offered him, as far as his poetic practice is concerned, is the possibility to change accent, pitch and tempo, while keeping traditional English metre in the background. One of the reasons for the appeal of jazz, Marshall W. Stearns says (quoting from an article by Belair in the *New York Times* (6 November 1955)), is that "'the contest between musical discipline and the individual expression it entails' symbolizes modern existence"[17]. As we shall seek to show later, this contest between the regular and angular, between the edited and unedited, the disciplined and the untamed, is a major element Larkin seems to have picked from jazz. Jazz also offered Larkin the possibility to blend more than one voice in his attempt to articulate a consciousness that is essentially two-layered. Describing what jazzmen call "fooling around with the beat", such as practised by Errol Garner, Marshall W. Stearns says: "The effect is schizophrenic, like rubbing your stomach in one direction and the top of your head in another" (*TSJ*, 5). The regular metre and the text would be the "foundation rhythm" (*TSJ*, 6), while the angular graffiti of the sub-text would be the "falsetto break", the "falsetto yells" ("like a cowboy's 'Yippee'... or the street-cry and field-holler of the American Negro"; *TSJ*, 10). The pattern in the poetry also seems to present something reminiscent of the "call-and-response pattern [which] occurs throughout jazz" (TSJ, 9). And it is not coincidental that, in "Toads", for instance, while one rumbling voice grumbles and shouts protest against and defiance to the "toad-work", another whimpering voice pops up with (or pipes) a belying reply. Also, breaking out from the commonality of the poem (grumbling and protest as the collective stomping of men on whom the toad-work "squats") into the freshness and rawness of graffiti, the solo reply of the graffiti sub-text is not different from that other major ingredient of jazz which is improvisation. This is, as in the conclusion of "Toads Revisited",

(17) *The Story of Jazz* (N. Y.: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1956), p. 295. (Further references to *The Story of Jazz* will appear in the text, abbreviated *TSJ*).

the solo comment that releases uninhibited recognition of the other barely disguised side of personality or reality, or the bare facts of the sub-text which the text--as a public object--tends to suppress and discipline.

After tracing the beginning of jazz to West Africa, and as part of his attempt to account for the survival of "many West African customs, musical and otherwise... in the New World", Marshall W. Stearns has this to say: "Since West Africa had no literature, customs and traditions were always memorized and handed down by example and word of mouth. And elements of West African music, invisible and preserved in a state of mind that cannot be policed, are still very much with us" (*TSJ*, 17). Because it is oral, this mode of expression is difficult to discipline and tame; and we may extrapolate from this that, because the musical element is improvised against a "foundation rhythm", it remains, by virtue of the improvised act, the true expression of the 'spontaneous, lively, and creative' (*TSJ*, 304). "And it is utterly impossible to conceal the quality of your improvisation in jazz, where you are judged on the spot by your peers", Marshall W. Stearns reminds us. He then comments: "Hence, fakery, insincerity, and pretentiousness are easily detected" (*TSJ*, 304-05). The self-interrogating 'rubber-stamp' practice in Larkin's poetry shows his awareness that he is 'playing' in public; the solo voice--the graffiti--is the signature of the authentic self challenging and speaking against the dominant order--the discipline--of the declared, authoritative text. The 'rubber-stamp' grafting the politically incorrect graffiti onto the politically correct text serves to release the suppressed, subdued, nagging, or non fooled voice.

The other element is "the blues", and this shows in that overriding "bluesy" quality of Larkin's poetry which it shares with Hardy's[18]. "What is the intensely maturing experience of which Hardy's modern man is most

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(18) In *America's Music: From the Pilgrims to the Present* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1987 (Illini Books Edition, 1992)), Gilbert Chase argues that the blues need not be melancholy. He writes: "... the blues had an outgoing social aspect (an antidote to the harsh, grueling farm labor of rural blacks) as well as an introspective, negative aspect, emphasizing frustration and suffering (ranging from sexual relationships to imprisonment and forced labor). The overall context of the blues may be characterized as a blending of realism and imagination, sadness and humor, satire and sexuality, with a matrix of repetition and spontaneity" (p. 489).

sensible?", Larkin asked, and he answered: "In my view it is suffering, or sadness"[19]. And, perhaps, as we seek to elicit some connection with the blues, we should add, a certain 'bittersweetness', a certain "stoic humour": "I'm laughing," says the blues singer, "just to keep from crying," or "Got the blues, but I'm too damn mean to cry" (*TSJ*, 107). The seemingly improvised bit of graffiti at the end of a Larkin's poem (now outright crude and made public by being appended to the declared text as "and fucking piss" (see note 19 below) and then polished, yet caricatural, as "Give me your arm, old toad;/ Help me down Cemetery road" ("Toads Revisited"), and then still kept private as in the previously quoted comment on "An Arundel Tomb" (see note 10 above)) is vital for maintaining personal integrity and faithfulness to experience. Improvisation and blues allow, indeed, a poise between rumbling protest and stormy anger, on the one hand, and self-irony and stoic submission, on the other. Adapted to the mode most characteristic of Larkin's poetry, the blues and the "foundation rhythm" correspond to the mood of anger, or sadness, or boredom--and the angular metre and improvised graffiti--, on the one hand, and the stoic, or submissive attitude--and the regular metre and disciplined text--, on the other. The "falsetto break" of the improvised graffiti and the departure from the foundation rhythm are the spontaneous solo voice of uninhibited individual expression and the bursting of the musical discipline, respectively.

The comic hint belying seriousness, the ironising 'postscript' undermining self-assuredness, the 'caricatural' graffiti debunking rhetorical and oratorical gestures, and the curt--but far-reaching--, verbally aggressive solo comment checking a high-spirited philosophical or romantic gush[20],

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(19) "Wanted: Good Hardy Critic", *Critical Quarterly*, VIII (Summer 1966); qtd. by David Timms in Philip Larkin (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1973), p. 177.

(20) Andrew Motion quotes the following lines from an early draft of Larkin's "High Windows", the poem that gives its title to the collection *High Windows* (1971):

Rather than words comes the thought of high windows
The sun pouring through plain glass
And beyond them deep blue air that shows
Nothing, and nowhere, and is endless
And fucking piss.

Motion, then, comments: "'And fucking piss' stands at a slight distance from the last stanza, as a comment on it rather than as a part of it, and yet the way it sabotages the high hopes of the preceding lines forms an important part of the poem's meaning" (*PLWL*, 355).

all these are at once the expression of an attitude and the illustration of an aesthetic principle at work. The attitude is that of someone 'less deceived'[21], perhaps because of a fully recognised Tiresian doubleness, breeding a two-fold awareness capable of holding in a single act of vision--and of acknowledging--"both sides of an argument", which allows him "to feel 'really himself'--full of choices, his integrity undefiled"[22]. The aesthetic principle characteristic of Larkin's achievement is based on routing the ordinariness, yet creativeness and freshness, of graffiti (sniper practice, filthy lingo and writerly vandalism) into the freshness and raw aliveness of an idiom that is at once intuitive and intellectually tried. More, that wild idiom is accommodated to the controlling principles of metre and versification; indeed, it can be said that Larkin's major poems rely on a heightening of plain, homely, everyday language and a rehabilitation of the formal and musical structures of English poetry in a manner reminiscent--graffiti apart--of Hardy's poetic practice.

Indeed, giving the floor--as it were--to the suppressed, subdued or nagging voice, as well as maintaining the double check of keeping to a plain idiom and remaining at once relatively tethered to traditional forms, have allowed Larkin to write that poetry which he had always aspired to and which he had understood The Movement stood for: "poetry for the whole man"[23]. It allowed him to be at once in tune with

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(21) *The Less Deceived* is the title of a poetry collection by Larkin, published in 1955.

(22) Although motion is referring here (*PLWL*, 443) to Larkin's ability to see both sides of an argument as a virtue marking 'several earlier poems'--that is poems in the *pre-High Windows* collections (namely, *The North Ship* (1945), *The Less Deceived* (1955) and *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964))--, the perceptive reader will find that this quality is characteristic of Larkin's later poetry, too.

(23) In a letter to Robert Conquest (dated 28 May 1955; *PLWL*, 265) who was then preparing to publish his anthology *New Lines* (and 'proposing to include a selection of Larkin's poems) with an Introduction aimed to spell out the 'common aims and purposes of The Movement', Larkin, who was more modest about the Movement-poets' achievements, had the following to say:

> (...) I am not quite so happy when you suggest that we have returned to 'the principle that poetry is written by and for the whole man', I don't think 'our' poetry stands up for a single second, in this respect, alongside poets who I should say did adopt that principle--Owen, Hopkins, Hardy, Edward Thomas--and I should be chary of suggesting that it does. One reason for this is that much of it seems so 'literary' in inspiration... For my part I feel we have got the method right--plain

the hopes and dreams of common man and cognisant of a condition that belies them even as it presents them as a necessary ingredient in man's life. It has allowed him to handle the dream and the reality that mocks it, the reality of an "age that finds it impossible both to face reality and to retain its dreams"[24]. It has also allowed him to create a sense of perspective, to express a consciousness that is basically two-layered.. Thus, by confirming division, he has managed--however paradoxical that may sound--to confirm integrity and not to dump a nagging dimension of the self that is part of self-definition. On the other hand, by lending an ear to the music of Hardy, and hence to the traditional forms and rhythms of English poetry, while borrowing from jazz the improvised solo departure against a "foundation" beat and from graffiti the rawness and freshness of spontaneity, he has struck the difficult balance of continuity (tradition) and fresh and effective departure (individual talent). This in itself is proof enough that--notwithstanding his own mixed self-appraisal (see note 22 above)--he not only "got the method right: plain language, absence of posturings, sense of proportion, humour, abandonment of the dithyrambic ideal", but also got the "matter: a fuller and more sensitive approach to life as it appears from day to day...".

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language, absence of posturings, sense of proportion, humour, abandonment of the dithyrambic ideal--and are waiting for the matter: a fuller and more sensitive response to life as it appears from day to day...

(24) P. R. King, *Nine Contemporary Poets: A Critical Introduction* (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1979), p. 43.

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