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RITUALS AND THEIR MEANING IN LARKIN'S POETRY

Literary criticism dealing with Larkin's poetry will in most cases arrive at such key-words as 'illusion and disillusionment', 'pessimism', 'sadness', 'fatalism'. Critics would quote Larkin's statement that 'deprivation is for me what daffodils were for Wordsworth'[1], and note that Larkin's favourite subjects are failure and weakness. They would point to the nostalgic, or even melancholic, mood of most of Larkin's verse, notice the abundance of negatives[2], and finally present Larkin as a poet of disenchantment, as a stoical agnostic[3], who firmly, if heroically, refuses to be 'taken in' by any ideas, beliefs or perspectives that offer consolation. Larkin's poetic stance is exactly to reject all consolatory systems as illusions and to face the human condition as it really is: miserable, dissatisfying, futile, since - in his own words - 'life looks insignificant beside death'[4].

In this context, Larkin, one of the most conservative and traditionally minded poets, may look like a nihilist[5] obsessively discrediting almost all accepted values. Love becomes in his poetry a source of disappointments, and when its sexual

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[1] Ph. L a r k i n, Required Writing, London 1983, p. 47.

[2] Ch. R i c k s, The Whitsun Weddings, "Phoenix" 1973, No. 11-12, p. 8-9.

[3] A. T h w a i t e, The Poetry of Philip Larkin, "Phoenix", p. 9.

[4] R i c k s, op. cit., p. 9.

[5] See A. R. J o n e s, A Note on Transatlantic Culture, "Phoenix", p. 143.

element enters, it may even become repulsive (as in "Dry Point"). Friendship is a relationship that life imposes on us, a matter of coincidence rather than our deliberate choice. Childhood, when looked at more closely, is but boredom ("Coming", "I Remember, I Remember"); procreation is nothing other than 'handing misery to man' ("This be the Verse"). Art may be mere delusion ("Reasons for Attendance"). Free will does not exist ("Dockery and Son"). Truth is only a matter of the degree to which we are deluded, the search for a pattern of truth in life is to no avail ("Ignorance"). Everything we do is rendered meaningless by the inevitability of death[6] ("Next, Please", "Nothing to Be Said"). It becomes understandable, then, why Raymond Gardiner wrote that Larkin's poetry lacks the humanity of comfort[7]. This is Larkin's conscious decision: accepting comfort would mean falling prey to another illusion. Humanity seems to involve exactly the opposite attitude: the sober awareness of the situation, and man's courage in facing the meaninglessness of his condition. Humanity means refusing to be 'taken in', deluded, even though being deceived may provide man with some comfort. Larkin recognizes man's need of comfort and consolation, and though his poetry testifies to the inaccessibility of ideals, to the relativity of truth not anchored in any objective reality, he will admit that 'the conflict with reality necessitates lies of one kind or another as a means of psychological survival'[8]. Ideals, however unreal they may be, bring comfort, and are needed by people; so, eventually, being deluded and refusing to be taken in amount to the same thing: 'a style our lives bring with them: a habit for a while' which suddenly hardnes 'into all we've got'[9].

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[6] Ph. G a r d n e r, The Wintry Drum, "Phoenix", p. 38.

[7] John Haffenden, 'A Conversation with Philip Larkin', "London Magazine" 1980, April, p. 86.

[8] L. K u b y, An Uncommon Poet For The Common Man, The Hague 1974, p. 89.

[9] "Dockery and Son" in Ph. L a r k i n, The Whitsun Weddings, London 1964, p. 37. All quotations of Larkin's poems come from the following collections: "The Less Deceived", London 1956; "The Whitsun Weddings", London 1964; "High Windows", London 1974.

In consequence, Larkin, the de-mystifier almost to the point of sado-mesochism, in some of his poems seems to long for mystification; having destroyed illusions, he starts yearning for them. Yet here he would not apply epistemological criteria, and would not enter the discussion about how real ideals and beliefs are, how well they are grounded in objective reality, or how well they survive intellectual scrutiny. If Larkin eventually expresses his longing for dead ideals and convictions, he does so only as a pragmaticist considering not their truth-values, but practical functions : emotional (securing 'psychological survival') and social (integrating society).

Coming back to Larkin's pessimism and to his nihilistic world-within-a-poem, one is surprised to see how much it resembles the world image presented in the works of Arthur Schopenhauer. The parallels are so strong that I venture to say that in fact Larkin's Weltanschauung is essentially Schopenhauerian.

I am aware that putting the names of Larkin and Schopenhauer together may sound an extravagant claim. One is reminded of Larkin's sneering remarks about things non-English; much quoted is his declaration that he does not read foreign poetry, that the name of Borges does not convey anything to him, and that he is proud of not having travelled outside Britain[10]. Larkin and Schopenhauer may be a surprising pair if one remembers the poet's programmatic distrust of any philosophical systems and ideologies, not to speak of foreign philosophies. Any yet it seems that the 19th century German philosopher found a disciple in the modern British poet, that his ideas are echoed in the works of Larkin and may serve as a keynote for their reading. I do not claim that Larkin ever read Schopenhauer; it is, however, well known that Thomas Hardy did[11]. The influence might have thus been not a direct one, but mediated by the works of Hardy, which Larkin much read and admired.

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[10] See the interviews in: L a r k i n, Required Writing.

[11] See for example: H. G a r w o o d, Thomas Hardy - An Illustration of the Philosophy of Schopenhauer, Philadelphia 1911; M. N o r m a n, Hardy and Schopenhauer, Toronto 1940.

For my further analysis I will try to reconstruct briefly the Larkinian world along the lines of Schopenhauer's philosophy. Such a move will, I hope, elucidate many of the poems and will provide me with a convenient starting point for later discussions.

'Suffering is essential to all life, and is increased by every increase of knowledge'[12]. That is a Schopenhauerian view very much shared by Larkin. Existence as such is corrupt, necessarily evil, inflicting pain, suffering, and producing disillusionment, dissatisfaction, insatiability. The concrete world is a world without possibilities, encapsulated and frozen, like the past which, having occurred, will never change. It is a world without freedom, and as such can be contrasted with the unreal world of ideals, longings, and expectations. Evil and pain are born in the actualization of the future, in the very moment our ideals are realized, acquire form, shape and - lose freedom.

Schopenhauer believes the inevitability of suffering to be caused by the principle of individuation[13]. The will, a thing--in-itself, searching for self-determination, becomes individualized, thus yielding to necessity, losing its freedom. Furthermore, individuation is not only seen as the fall into the world of necessities from the realm of freedom, but it also gives rise to the struggle and conflicts between distinct individualized wills. Individuation is thus the source of evil; and existence, since it is the existence of individual beings, becomes the synonym for suffering. The extinction of the individual will is then the only way to eliminate the suffering.

We can observe the same line of thought in Larkin's poems. All the dissatisfaction that life offers us results from the fact that we exist as individual beings and as such we tend to inflict pain on one another; we are subjected to the world of necessities and ultimately, to death. As individual beings

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[12] B. R u s s e l l, History of Western Philosophy, London 1979, p. 724.

[13] R u s s e l l, op. cit.

we experience loneliness; being different we become isolated and unable to communicate. Schopenhauer believed that 'instinct urges man to procreation, which brings into existence a new occasion for suffering and death'[14], and we shall not be surprised to find that the very same view is expressed in what is commonly regarded as one of Larkin's 'light' poems, "This Be the Verse":

Man hands on misery to man.
It deepens like a coastal shelf.
Get out as early as you can,
And don't have any kids yourself.

Being born is itself a repetition of the Fall paradigm : in giving birth, the faults of the parents, like the original sin, are passed on to their children. 'Getting out as early as you can' remains the only, if absurd, solution, coming very close to the idea of non-existence (the best expression of which can be found in Larkin's "Wants": 'Beneath it all, desire of oblivion runs'), which may be seen as the consequence of Schopenhauer's 'extinction', the shedding of identity.

In another poem, "At Grass", Larkin writes about two famous race horses, now no longer remembered, living their lives of no history, no memory, no names. Yet it is exactly by becoming anonymous, by losing their identity, that they gain peace and happiness. Their withdrawal from the race-course is thus not simply a shift from clamorous fame to peaceful oblivion, but from identity exemplified by the names of the horses, to its loss.

There are other affinities with Schopenhauer's philosophy worth mentioning in connection with Larkin's standpoint, like the relation between the real and the ideal. Yet this pessimistic, essentially Schopenhauerian attitude is counterbalanced in a number of Larkin's poems by a different stance. Clearly affirmative tones can be found in such poems as "To the Sea" or "Show Saturday", poems presenting values which Larkin would cherish in spite of his all-embracing scepticism.

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[14] Ibidem.

It is characteristic that all these poems deal with communal life and its expression in strictly patterned forms of behaviour - rituals. The ritual, as in T. S. Eliot, appears to be the way in which communities organize their lives and give sense to the reality that surrounds them, however chaotic it might seem. The meaning of such rituals resides precisely in their social function. They are the means by which the society can satisfy the need of living within an ordered, structured world; the need for transcending time and for alleviating sorrow and anxiety caused by the realization of human mortality. The ritual enables the communities to stand outside time, outside history, and thus to establish a hierarchy of values which would not appear to be contingent, historical, or relative[15]. It integrates communities and helps individuals to achieve identification with the goals and values of the society. By making such identification possible it can actually carry out Schopenhauer's postulate of the extinction of individual will as the source of evil and suffering although in an entirely different way : not by engaging in the states of nirvana and meditation, nor by death, but by seeing oneself as a part of the whole that is the community in which one lives.

It can be said that while American literary tradition is essentially individualistic and transcendental, the English one is communal. Whereas the generalization that all world literature has as its underlying theme the conflict of the individual's needs and the pressures of society may be accepted without many reservations, it is also true that one of the endemic features of British writing, especially in certain periods of its history, e.g. in the Augustan Age, was the urge to reconcile the individual with the communal, to present the individual as a member of the community in a mutually rewarding relationship. Life in and for the community was the answer of many English writers to the feeling of meaninglessness, diagnosed as the malady of the 20th century man[16].

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[15] Cf. M. Eliade, Sacrum - mit - historia, Warszawa 1970.

[16] Cf. M. Green, British Marxists and American Freudians, [in:] Innovations, ed. R. Bergonzi, London 1968, p. 165.

The sense of continuity as manifested in repeated communal rituals enables man to transcend time, thus providing him with a sense of life which is absolute and a-historical. It should be observed here that in Larkin's poems where certain everyday activities, usually involving whole communities, become present-day rituals, we find no signs of death, no death-anxiety so characteristic of Larkin. These communal activities, the rituals, enable man to overcome the anxiety caused by the awareness of his limitations as an individual being. If, as I demonstrated earlier, individuation is to Larkin a source of 'moral evil' and suffering, then the ritual by transforming the individual into a member of the community, by making him anonymous, also saves him from all the predicaments that would otherwise befall him precisely for being an individual: the fear of death in the shadow of which life is rendered meaningless, the sense of isolation and loneliness, the chaos and contingency of the world ("Thematically, the desire for community and continuity is played hard against the isolation and loneliness that are felt by Larkin to be part of the condition of modern man"[17]).

Larkin's belief in the redemptive powers of the community and its simple rituals has a very pragmatic function. It is first of all useful, just as the Church and religion may be useful. Still, Larkin, an avowed agnostic, would prefer communal activities to the acceptance of any religious credo, since the former do not claim access to truth, they are pure forms, ways in which life is organized. Going to the seaside every year, or taking part in a funfair, are activities that do not involve accepting any beliefs or illusions. They are forms of going through life with the authority of the ages and the past generations. By introducing beneficial order into the chaos of the world, by patterning human lives, they do not include any truth-claims, which Larkin's essentially rational, reflective, uncompromising scrutiny would immediately discover and refute.

Larkin'readiness to accept the values represented by com-

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[17] S. P e t c h, The Art of Philip Larkin, Sydney 1980, p. 107.

munal life, which can be best seen in his latest collection "High Windows", grows naturally from his early assumption that being aware of illusions and yielding to them in one's ignorance do not differ much in the perspective of the ultimate, sub specie mortis. Being 'less deceived' does not alleviate the pains of life. On the contrary, this awareness may become a source of a still greater anxiety and disappointment. If then knowing the truth (or, by that matter, knowing that truth is unattainable) and remaining ignorant are just two 'styles' of life, equally justifiable, then what matters is the pragmatic dimension, the practical consequences of adopting one or the other. And thus in "Toads Revisited", Larkin abandoned his earlier view on the limiting nature of work, and accepted it for its practical function. He was not concerned with the economical necessity of work, but perceived its place in the human condition, as a help in man's struggle through life:

> What else can I answer,
> When the lights come on at four
> At the end of another year?
> Give me your arm, old toad;
> Help me down Cemetry Road.

"Self's the Man" can be read as a variant of "Reasons for Attendance", in which the speaker, acknowledging the right of both himself and the others to live lives that they have chosen, points to the fact that the choice was a personal decision depending on one's different ideas about life. Pure reason will not be helpful in choosing between different styles of life : the truth-value of the assumptions on which the decision may be grounded is irrelevant here, what matters is that these particular choices satisfy one's need for an ordered and meaningful life. The speaker of the poems does not present an authoritative or patronizing attitude towards the other mode of life. He does not attempt to justify his decision, nor to question others. The ironic comments at the end of both poems undermine any certainty in this respect. The speaker is not sure about the rightness of his decision to devote himself to art and give up earthly pleasures ("Reasons for Attendance"):

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.

Similar uncertainty, which in fact is a recognition of equal value of both 'styles' of life, can be observed in "Self's The Man" and in "Dockery and Son", where it concerns the choice of remaining unmarried and childless. The speaker may be described as an agnostic, who - as such - cannot reject the other possibility. This standpoint, the hallmark of which is the recognition of the relative character of the choices concerning one's life, may create an impression that the speaker's of Larkin's poems, when they function as his porte-paroles, may refuse to support any side, and refrain from making any positive statements but the agnostic 'I do not know'.

In Larkin's later poems one finds much more positive tones and his ironic scepticism gives place to affirmative statements. "To the Sea" and "Show Saturday" are the poems in which the speaker envies the life he observes and does not try to discredit it with either irony or scepticism. In both poems, and especially in "Show Saturday", the speaker is no longer emotionally detached from the world he describes; he is not a distant observer who from his isolated position comments on the life of others[18] ("Reasons for Attendance", "Church Going", "The Whitsun Weddings", "Faith Healing"). The scenes of commonplace rituals engage him, and seem to become the long-searched-for answer, the 'centre that would hold', as if the speaker could find in them what Eliot did in Christianity : the pivot, the central point around which to build. Engaging in such activities as going to the seaside or to a Saturday show, are not examples of illusions shared by people, but turn out to be a cure against fragmentation, separateness, chaos, and misery caused by individuation, and a way of overcoming the destructive powers of 'our element - Time'. They are Larkin's 'central points'.

[18] Cf. D. H o l b r o o k, Lost Bearings in English Poetry, London 1977, p. 174-181.

The Saturday show takes place in summer; it is not spring - the renewal of life, but it is the year at its peak, with gifts of nature, 'the extrusions of earth', carefully displayed on wood tables. The religious overtones of fertility rites and harvest offerings are made clear when we notice 'blanch leeks like church candles'. The participants at the show are taken out of their daily context, moved into a semi-sacred dimension that brings them joy and vitality, that unites and integrates them. When after the show they have to go back to their daily routines, to their individual lives, they will again become only fragments of the whole they once were. Going back home from the show means leaving the life of a community and returning to individual names, to lives in individual houses with private addresses, situated in some obscure, isolated, far-away settlements.

They're loading jumps on a truck.
Back now to private addresses, gates and lamps
In high stone one-street villages, empty at dusk,
And side roads of small towns.

It is also going back to autumn, and ultimately to winter. The sunny Saturday afternoon, the community's reunion, when it ends, leads people to what terrified Larkin in all earlier poems: inevitable death, the passage of time. I does not come then as a surprise that the poem ends with an emotional appeal: 'Let it always be there', a wish to save the event from the destructiveness of time. The show, in fact, may become perennial, it has existed for centuries and has the power to regenerate each year:

Let it stay hidden there like strength, below
Sale-bills and swindling; something people do,
Not noticing how time's rolling smithy-smoke
Shadows much greater gestures; something they share
That breaks ancestrally each year into
Regenerate union. Let it always be there.

The poem reads like a lengthy catalogue, a conglomeration of scenes, connected only by the place in which they happen. It is a catalogue of things, yet much different from those,

shorter ones, we can see in "The Large Cool Store" or "Essential Beauty". Whereas in the latter poems, a series of unconnected images, a mere listing of things, served to evoke the atmosphere of a disconnected, fragmentary, and hence meaningless, world, in "Show Saturday" the literal flood of images which goes on for over fifty lines creates an atmosphere of profusion and vitality. It is life in its abundance: fascinating and attractive. It seems that the poet was carried away by the variety and richness of the events he was describing. Scenes, objects and characters follow one another, the poet's eye wanders about like a film camera: the flow of images seems to have no end.

There is, however, another interesting feature of this catalogue which constitutes the bulk of the poem. The observer delights in the scenes, enjoys the variety of colours, shapes, and events, and consequently, the images within a poem are all pictures of things as they are, they are not meant to stand for anything except themselves, they do not refer us to any other reality but their own - contrary to what happens in almost all other Larkin's poems. Here, the observer, Larkin himself, becomes satisfied with the mere perception, with sensual, mostly visual, pleasures. No matter how detailed the image of a hospital in "The Building" is, one feels that its presentation is organized by some general preconceived idea that it is meant to convey. The physical properties of the building all turn into meaningful symbols; as do most of the seemingly impressionist details[19]: washed-to-rags ward clothes, a locked church, traffic past the gate, the beckoning of the nurse,

> [...] past these doors are rooms, and rooms past those,
> And more rooms yet, each one further off
> And harder to return from.

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[19] For the reasons given later in my article, I disagree with Anthony Thwaite using the term 'impressionist detail' with regard to Larkin's poetry (cf. T h w a i t e, op. cit., p. 59). Larkin is essentially a Symbolist poet, and most of the details in his poetry acquire symbolic meanings. This aspect of Larkin's work has been explored by: A. M o t i o n, Philip Larkin, London 1982.

In this poem, as in most of his poetry, Larkin makes use of realistic detail[20], which may seem like mere impartial reporting, in creating symbolic meanings. In "The Building" he is not so much interested in the actual hospital building, as in what it stands for: the inevitability of death. "Show Saturday" is one of the very few poems in which Larkin's symbol-making activities are not foregrounded, and in its descriptive part, they are almost suppressed (they will re-emerge towards the end of the poem, when the show ends). In its longer part, the poem is a camera-like rendering of what is going on at the show, without any attempt at hierarchizing the scenes or imposing on them symbolic interpretation. Sometimes the pictures of minute details verge on irrelevancy when they appear in the poem purely arbitrarily and indiscriminately[21]:

> There is more than just animals:
> Bead-stalls, balloon-men, a Bank; a beer-marquee that
> Half-screens a canvas Gents; a tent selling tweed,
> And another, jackets.

The present tense and short phrases emphasize the general tone of immediacy, of the things actually happening, as if the eye became involved in the spectacle and could not yet decide where to rest, distracted by the multitude of things. What the eye perceives first of all is things, the poem abounds with nouns, which - often unmodified - follow one another as in the quotation above. The details, which in the beginning of the poem are sometimes bracketed to indicate their marginal importance, take over in later parts : bracketing is abandoned almost entirely and the issue of how important given details are disappears. The whole descriptive part becomes homogenized. The picture is thus untypical of Larkin, since the world represented in the poem is not mediated by the poet's intellect. The images appear at random, the poet's presence does not in-

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[20] D. L o d g e writes about Larkin's 'metonymic and synecdochic details' in D. L o d g e, Modes of Modern Writing, London 1977, p. 217.

[21] L o d g e notes the 'near redundant specificity' in Larkin's verse, (op. cit., p. 217).

tervene in recreating the scene. In this context it is not proper to talk of impressions as the poem is concerned with things in themselves, rather than in how they are perceived by us. One could risk saying that the poem is perhaps the most 'metaphysical' one, being concerned with the world as it is, independent of any interpreting or cognitive mind. In many other poems Larkin would build images with scepticism, with the uncertainty of how things really are, exploiting the differences between the way things appear to us, the way we think of them and the 'unattainable truth' about them. "Show Saturday" does not present any of these concerns.

Similarly affirmative tones, elevating ordinary communal activities to the status of rituals, can be found in To the Sea, a poem which opens Larkin's last collection. In four stanzas, the poet, using his favourite technique of a close-up, presents the scene at a seaside with people, young and old, sunbathing, swimming, enjoying themselves. What is striking in the poem is the way in which people melt into the landscape. The scenery, though obviously crowded with human beings, overshadows them. In the first stanza, there is no explicit mention of the people, the only indications of their presence are towels and red bathing caps which, however, are mentioned in the same line as steep beach and blue water, as if they were objects of the same order. Over the whole scene Larkin draws the line of the horizon which encompasses and gives unity to everything that can be found on the beach; in this perspective, the differences between human and non-human become negligible. When the poet writes 'everything crowds under the low horizon' he means both the people, the man-made objects, and natural phenomena, coexisting in perfect harmony. The harmony, which may seem rather surprising in Larkin, is not threatened by the presence of transistor radios, chocolate wrappers and soup tins. They also belong to the scenery and their presence there is redeemed by the harmony. They have lost all the associations they stood for in other of Larkin's poems, for instance "Going Going"; they are no longer seen in the context of an ecological threat, man's destructive attitude to nature, technology littering the landscape, etc. In the second half of

the first stanza the poet introduces colours: blue, red, yellow - which are, of course, primary colours from which all others derive - and white as their perfect union. They are the fundamentals, the base - other colours would already be the products of the differentiation processes which, as I have tried to show, stand for the source of corruption and misery. The mention of the primary colours in the depiction of the seaside scene introduces a symbolic interpretation of the scene, which becomes an emblem of purity and of everything that is basic.

One should be aware that the appearance of details in "To the Sea", as in most of Larkin's poems, has hardly anything to do with the actual perception of things. Larkin is not an impressionist[22] who would delight in colours, forms, objects for their own aesthetic, sensual value. If a detail, a sudden close-up appears in the poem, it is not governed by the logic of perception, but by the argument of the poem. All the details are thus meaningful details, significant data from which Larkin can start to produce a more universal statement. In this context, colours which appear in "To the Sea", are not just colours, physical qualities of the perceived world, but they become indicative of some other - symbolic - meanings.

If then blue, red and yellow are primary colours, and constitute the crowd that can be seen under the horizon, it is on the horizon that a ship appears, the colour of which is white - white being the synthesis of all colours, the perfect union and the principle of homogeneity. The steamer, natural as it may be in the picture of the beach and the seaside, becomes symbolic in a way that is so characteristic of Larkin. It is stuck there, motionless, and it will only move towards the end of the poem, or rather it will disappear suddenly. Its colour is once again emphasized: 'The white steamer has gone', as if the poet was afraid that its significance might have escaped the readers. The motionless ship, taken out of time, as if in a moment of the poet's insight or in a moment of communion that the crowds on the beach experience - encapsulates the whole scene,

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[22] See reference 19.

being of the here and now, and yet transcending time. The ship disappears when the ritual comes to an end.

The scene which is that of the union between man and nature, between an individual and the community, between the past and the present, reveals itself to the speaker when he steps 'over the low wall that divides'. Dividing, is, of course, the opposite of uniting, and going beyond the wall is like going beyond the individuation which Schopenhauer believed to be responsible for the misery of human condition. It is thus a step from the world of separate, divided, individual objects, into the world that is unified, structured, ordered, patterned, and hence-rendered meaningful. It is a step towards the white colour of the motionless ship on the horizon.

Going to the sea is in the poet's own words 'half an annual pleasure half a rite', the sense of which lies in its reappearance each year. Constituting positive links between the past and the present, it integrates not only the life of a society, but also gives unity and meaning to the life of an individual, the life which in these particular activities manages to go beyond time and remain still, like the steamer on the horizon; the same and unchanging. The stillness, however, is not that of a rock, or a dead body; it possesses some organic quality : it has its own life, life which is already redeemed and free from the destructive powers of time. The repetition implies movement and renewal, hence:

> The small hushed waves' repeated fresh collapse
> Up the warm yellow sand

It is thus both 'repeated' and 'fresh'; and although we learn that the steamer is 'stuck' in the afternoon, the line is immediately followed by an enthusiastic exclamation : 'Still going on, all of it, still going on !'. Punning on the word 'still' emphasizes the paradoxical state in which there is both stillness and life. Thus the scene does not resemble the cold, frozen image that Keats saw on the urn, nor the mechanical bird of Yeats' "Sailing to Byzantium", but is a scene redeemed from time and full of life as well. What is more, the scene at the

seaside, when taken symbolically, becomes life in miniature : people there perform their everyday activities, like resting, eating, sleeping. They 'lead the uncertain children' who in the course of the poem change into 'the rigid old'. There is a sense of gradual transformation of one generation into another, hinted at by the use of two verbs related in meaning : 'to lead' and 'to wheel'. What we witness at the seaside is thus not a particular activity which takes place at a given time each year, but life in its fullness. The poem goes beyond the limitations of its concrete spatial and temporal setting, and turns into a picture of the human world which has become ordered, meaningful, and satisfying.

The setting of the ritual in "To the Sea" is the seashore during the summer holidays, the time is thus the same as in "Show Saturday": the peak of the year. Although the sun is not mentioned in the poem, its presence dominates the scene. Together with the water (the sea), it is an essential life-giving force, almost a condition of the regeneration of the event. In this perspective, the journey to the sea turns into a pilgrimage, and the annual rite becomes a quasi-religious ceremony of sun-worshipping[23] and the liturgy of water (allusions to ritualistic ablutions, baptism, etc.). In a similar way, though on a much lesser scale, religious overtones were introduced in "Show Saturday" (oblations of vegetables). In both cases one can speak of natural rituals, or natural religiosity.

The religious, or quasi-religious character that Larkin clearly gives to the scene in "To the Sea" is later foregrounded by the moral aspect of the sea-going ritual. The light of the sun brings illumination to the speaker, causing him to discover the true meaning of the people's simple activities. But it also provides him with the moral illumination which closes the poem:

> [...] teaching their children by a sort
> Of clowning; helping the old, too, as they ought.

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[23] Cf. D. T i m m s, Philip Larkin, Edinburgh 1973, p. 129.

The moral duty to others is not only enacted at the seaside, but actually originates in scenes like these. The last phrase of the poem presents the convictions of the people at the seaside, and is not a judgement of the speaker, which exempts the poem from the charge of being patronizing. 'To do what ought to be done' is a ritual, whose substance is a moral obligation which the people on the beach take for granted. Basic ethical codes seem thus to have their roots in such simple rituals. Larkin, Orwell's disciple[24] in his distrust of great ideologies or belief-systems, acknowledges here the 'natural' system of values, by which he would mean values sanctioned by common, historical practice and supposedly originating in some inner ethical sensibility. This will explain why Larkin, who denies any commitment to political, philosophical, or religious credos, would nevertheless declare his strong attachment to a clearly conservative set of values: 'thrift, hard work, reverence, desire to preserve'[25]. Such ethics is of course an unwritten code, which by analogy to common law may be called 'common ethics'. It passes through generations as a habit, a way of life, which the young inherit from their fathers by imitating their behaviour, and as such it does not become subject to critical examination, questioning, or theoretical speculation. The ritual, in its broad meaning, is a means of perpetuating and transmitting the sense of the moral values which a given society cherishes, and makes for the continuity of its way of life.

In my discussion of the meaning of rituals in the poetry of Philip Larkin, I have concentrated on the two poems from Larkin's last collection, "High Windows", since they exemplify best his turning away from pessimism and the sense of despair which the poet might have inherited from Schopenhauer via the works of Thomas Hardy. The two poems, as no other titles in Larkin's poetic output, testify to his search for positive va-

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[24] Orwell's influence on Larkin and The Movement Poets is discussed in B. M o r r i s o n, The Movement, London 1980, p. 93-95.

[25] L a r k i n, op. cit., p. 52.

lues that might be acknowledged by the world which first declared the death of God and then announced the 'end of ideology'. Both of them include perhaps the most affirmative tones that ever appeared in Larkin's writings. Other poems in which one can find Larkin's interest in the ritual as a means of satisfying man's social and emotional needs, (most notably "Church Going" and "The Whitsun Weddings") do not present such a strong, assertive attitude. "To the Sea" and "Show Saturday", contrary to the other two poems just mentioned, are concerned with completely 'secular' activities and events not connected with any formal religion. The notion of ritual has thus been broadened to include activities of everyday life which, though unauthorized by the Church, demonstrate the same power and perform similar functions.

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RYTUAŁY I ICH ZNACZENIE W POEZJI LARKINA

Światopogląd poetycki Philipa Larkina wykazuje wiele zbieżności z filozofią Schopenhauera, i to nie tylko w swojej ogólnie pesymistycznej wymowie, ale i w szczegółach. Larkin, podobnie jak Schopenhauer, uznaje samo istnienie za synonim cierpienia, a źródło zła widzi w procesach zróżnicowania, ujednostkowienia. Podobnie jak niemiecki filozof, dostrzega on ludzką skłonność do automistyfikacji, która przejawia się np. w tworzeniu systemów religijnych i tłumaczy ją potrzebą usensowienia świata, szukania oparcia w arbitralnie przyjmowanych prawdach absolutnych. Cierpienie, będące immanentnym składnikiem życia, przezwyciężyć można w drodze "wygaszenia" własnej tożsamości: dla Schopenhauera oznaczało to odmowę uczestnictwa w świecie i oddanie się medytacji. Dla Larkina, realizuje się to przede wszystkim w życiu we wspólnocie.

W opinii krytyków, poezja Larkina przeniknięta jest pesymizmem, zbliża się nawet do postaw nihilistycznych, gdy kwestionuje powszechnie przyjęte prawdy i wartości. Wobec faktu istnienia śmierci, życie traci swój sens, a jakakolwiek wiara, przynosząca pociechę, okazuje się tylko iluzją. Ta pesymistyczna wizja zostaje wyraźnie przezwyciężona w dwu utworach z ostatniego zbioru wierszy Larkina. "Show Saturday" i "To the Sea"

opisują świeckie rytuały: sobotnie festyny i letnie wycieczki nad morze. Rytuały te świadczą o kontynuacji tradycji, są dla Larkina zwycięstwem nad czasem i śmiercią, wyjściem poza historię, a także przez to, że zapewniają uczestnikom identyfikację ze wspólnotą, spełniają postulat "wygaszenia" indywidualnej tożsamości. W przeciwieństwie do rytuałów religijnych, nie wymagają one przyjęcia żadnego systemu przekonań, nie są wyrazem wiary w istnienie prawd absolutnych, lecz stanowią sposób organizacji życia, są czystymi formami, o których potrzebie świadczą ich konsekwencje praktyczne.