

# “So unreal”: The Unhomely Moment in the Poetry of Philip Larkin

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*Philip Larkin has often been perceived as a poet of the everyday, his work projecting a stable and easily identifiable version of reality. However, while there can be little doubt that Larkin’s ability to evoke the sights and sounds of the “weekday world” is an essential part of his enduring appeal, such readings have tended to obscure the fact that, for this writer in particular, the boundary between what is real and “unreal” is hardly ever clear cut. Larkin’s preoccupation with the question of whether “things are really what they seem” is evident from the earliest stages of his writing and the primary purpose of this article is to show how this insecurity of perception can be thought of in terms of what Freud, in his essay “The Uncanny”, calls “das unheimlich”; the unhomely, a term Freud uses to describe experiences which involve a profound sense of unease in one’s world and one’s identity. Larkin’s susceptibility to such feelings is considered in the light of his admiration for the poetry of Edward Thomas, someone whose relation to the world was as strange and nebulous as his own, and who provided Larkin with an instructive example of how he might explore such peculiar states of consciousness, of unfamiliarity and unhomedness, in verse.*

For some time, Philip Larkin was cast by a number of his critics as a poet of the “everyday”, his work projecting a stable and easily identifiable version of reality. Trevor Tolley brings his detailed study of Larkin’s poetry to a close by concluding that:

The power of Larkin’s work as a whole remains undeniable. It takes us into a world that is distinctively his own, yet one that resembles our everyday world. This world is presented so as to imply a particular perspective—a perspective reinforced by the tightly containing rationality and the clear sense that reality, in common sense, is what it seems to be, that is characteristic of his work. Its power lies in the fact that it locates the tremendous archetypal events and concerns of humanity in their full force in our everyday suburban setting, with all the diminution and all the immediacy this implies.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Tolley, 200–1.

Larkin himself colluded in the projection of this somewhat sober image. In numerous essays and interviews he invites his audience to view him as the voice of sanity, reason and truth. His objection to modernism's "irresponsible exploitations of technique in contradiction of human life as we know it"<sup>2</sup> appeals to notions of a shared, "common" reality, likewise his claim that poetry should be "an affair of sanity, of seeing things as they are".<sup>3</sup> However, as James Fenton has pointed out, for many readers what is so striking about Larkin's poetry is not so much the "commonness" of the perspective as the uniqueness of the point of view.<sup>4</sup> Taking this observation as its starting point, this article will use Sigmund Freud's influential essay "The Uncanny" (1919) to show that, while there can be little doubt that Larkin's ability to evoke the sights, sounds and smells of "the weekday world"<sup>5</sup> lies at the heart of his enduring appeal, for this poet in particular the boundary between what is true and beautiful, between what is real and "unreal" is in fact hardly ever clear cut.

Larkin's interest in the way in which people can be deceived by appearances and perceptions is evident from the earliest stages of his writing. The sonnet "Nothing Significant was Really Said" was written whilst the poet was still at school.<sup>6</sup> It would not be long before Larkin would leave King Henry VIII Coventry to take up a place at St John's College, Oxford, and, in anticipation of the move, the poem describes how a seemingly self-assured undergraduate succeeds in captivating his audience:

Nothing significant was really said,  
Though all agreed the talk superb, and that  
The brilliant freshman with his subtle thought  
Deserved the praise he won from every side.  
All but one declared his future great,  
His present sure and happy; they that stayed  
Behind, among the ashes, were all stirred  
By memory of his words, as sharp as grit.<sup>7</sup>

The one voice which fails to declare the young man's present "sure and happy" is that of Larkin's characteristically detached poetic persona who, in the sestet, reveals that the student's performance is an illusion which masks deep unhappiness:

The one had watched the talk: remembered how  
He'd found the genius crying when alone;  
Recalled his words: "O what unlucky streak  
Twisting inside me, made me break the line?"

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<sup>2</sup>Larkin, *Required Writing*, 297. All future citations to this volume are given as *RW*.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 197.

<sup>4</sup>Fenton, 45.

<sup>5</sup>Larkin, *Collected Poems*, 135. All future citations to this volume are given as *CP*.

<sup>6</sup>According to Anthony Thwaite, the poem was written before March 1940 (Larkin, *CP*, 235). Larkin went up to Oxford in October 1940.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 235.

What was the rock my gliding childhood struck,  
And what bright unreal path has led me here?"<sup>8</sup>

Underlying these lines, so reminiscent of W. H. Auden in their content and style, is the existential idea that the mere fact of "being-in-the-world-with-others" presents a threat to individual identity, since it requires us to compromise our true self and, to a greater or lesser degree, put on a "performance".<sup>9</sup> As in the later poem "Best Society" (1951), the male protagonist is seen as only being able to reveal his true self once he has entered a state of isolation.<sup>10</sup> So as the title of the poem suggests, although the student's talk was "superb" and met with warm approval, nothing significant, that is, nothing related to the emotional truth of the speaker's condition, was said. The word "unreal", located in the final line, where the student refers to the unseen forces that have shaped his present situation, stands out as particularly important, not least because it was to become a favourite of Larkin's, and it crops up again in another early poem "Schoolmaster" (1940):

He sighed with relief. He had got the job. He was safe.  
Putting on his gown, he prepared for the long years to come  
That he saw, stretching like aisles of stone  
Before him. He prepared for the *unreal* life  
Of exercises, marks, honour, speech days and games.<sup>11</sup>

It was a fate which Larkin was anxious to avoid, fearful that immersion in the life of others involved dissolution of the self: those "aisles of stone" implicate the rituals of marriage and death, anticipating the narrator's view of the marriage ceremony as a "happy funeral" in "The Whitsun Weddings". Again, emphasis is placed upon the potentially alienating effect of role play and public "performance" upon individual identity, a theme which is made manifest when the schoolmaster puts on his gown. Equally pertinent, however, is Larkin's sense of how the most seemingly innocuous and ordinary of routines appears strange and "unreal".<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 235.

<sup>9</sup>See Heidegger, 222.

<sup>10</sup>"Best Society," which was only published after Larkin's death, concludes:

I lock my door.  
The gas-fire breathes. The wind outside  
ushers in evening rain.  
Once more  
Uncontradicting solitude  
Supports me on its giant palm;  
And like a sea-anemone  
Or simple snail, there cautiously  
Unfolds, emerges, what I am. (Larkin, *CP*, 56–7)

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 248, my italics.

<sup>12</sup>The word "unreal" was often used by Larkin to describe the effect of female sexuality upon the male psyche. In "The Whitsun Weddings" the girls' jewellery marks them out "unreal" from the rest" (*CP*, 115). Similarly, in

The main aim of this essay is to show how this insecurity of perception and personal identity can be thought of in terms of what Freud called “*das unheimlich*”: “the uncanny” or, to take a more literal translation, “the unhomely”; that mysterious commingling of the familiar and the unfamiliar which dissolves any sense of fixed knowledge and causes the disruption of a perceived “concrete” world. In his essay of 1919, Freud begins by explaining that “the essential condition for the emergence of a sense of the uncanny is a state of intellectual uncertainty”, particularly regarding the reality of who one is and what is being experienced.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps the most open confession of Larkin’s susceptibility to such experiences occurs in “Ignorance”:

Strange to know nothing, never to be sure  
Of what is true or right or real,  
But forced to qualify *or so I feel*,  
Or *Well, it does seem so*:  
*Someone must know.*<sup>14</sup>

While it would obviously be unwise to draw a straightforward parallel between the voice of the speaker and that of Larkin himself, it is hard to avoid the comparison given that the question of whether “things are really what they seem”<sup>15</sup> is one of *the* underlying concerns of his writing. Similarly, if the notion of identity as something that is tenuous and unstable, in a world lacking the shared social and cultural values of previous generations, is scarcely unique to Larkin, he does seem to have experienced this insecurity with particular acuteness. Andrew Swarbrick has noted that, until relatively recently, critics have been happier to construct a national identity for Larkin, perceiving in him a defining voice of Englishness. This tendency has somewhat obscured the fact that,

At the centre of Larkin’s poetry is the pursuit of self-definition, a self which feels threatened by the proximity of others but which fears that without relationship with otherness the self has no validity.<sup>16</sup>

The tension identified here, already evident in the poems we have looked at so far, is addressed in a much more explicit fashion in “Reasons for Attendance”, where the male protagonist attempts to explain why he commits himself to the isolated life of the artist rather than the company of his fellow human beings. Passing a dance hall, he hears music and stops to observe the young couples dancing to “the beat of

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“The Large Cool Store” the display of women’s lingerie is seen to evoke an idealised vision of female beauty which is the product of “our young unreal wishes” (Larkin, *CP*, 135). In the unfinished novel *A New World Symphony*, the male protagonist is dissuaded from asking his lover to marry him by the feeling that “the question seemed unreal, almost like a half-remembered dream” (Hull University Archives, second draft, 50).

<sup>13</sup>Freud, 125. All future citations are to this volume.

<sup>14</sup>Larkin, *CP*, 107.

<sup>15</sup>“Out in the lane I pause” (*ibid.*, 253).

<sup>16</sup>Swarbrick, 168.

happiness".<sup>17</sup> Again, Larkin adopts the position of a detached, passive observer, someone who has opted not to fully engage with the life around him in the conventional manner and consequently feels out-of-place, or, in terms more relevant to the present discussion, not-at-home. When moved to defend his isolated position, the character declares that the idea that happiness can only be found in partnership is misplaced:

[...] Why be out here?  
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 as I'm concerned.  
What calls me is that lifted rough-tongued bell  
(Art, if you like) whose individual sound  
Insists I too am individual.<sup>18</sup>

The narrator goes on to assert that happiness is not found by any one single means, and believing this he is content to stay outside watching the dancers seek happiness in their own different way. However, in the final line his asceticism is abruptly and crucially undercut, with the narrator concluding that both he and the dancers are satisfied,

If no one has misjudged himself. Or lied.<sup>19</sup>

Rather than being an authentic choice, the foundations upon which the persona has constructed his identity are revealed as being deceptive and illusory, with Larkin suggesting that the speaker may be doing little more than deceiving himself when he claims that he can find fulfilment in isolation. If we look back through the poem we can see that the speaker's rational approach to his situation conceals considerable self-doubt. The manner in which he reduces relationships to "sex" and his derogatory description of how the dancers "maul to and fro" indicates that he is anxious not to envisage an appealing contrast to his loneliness, while his use of the word "they" to refer to those inside the dance hall has an alienating effect, dehumanising the dancers to the extent that they appear an anonymous crowd. Indeed, although the speaker claims to be completely at ease with his identity and presents it to us as something that is the natural result of his personality, there is a sense in which he has *consciously* attempted to distance himself from the crowd so as to shield his fragile sense of self; being-with-others brings one's identity and personal integrity more sharply into focus, something which the speaker seems anxious to avoid. Yet his efforts are ultimately in vain because, by the end of the poem, he has been surprised into a new

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<sup>17</sup>Larkin, *CP*, 80.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*

and disconcerting perspective on his life, and has moved from a position of secure knowledge to one of radical uncertainty, ambivalence and insecurity: in other words, the exact state of mind which is symptomatic of the uncanny. The point is reinforced by Nicholas Royle's observation that the *unheimlich* "has to do with a strangeness of framing and borders, an experience of liminality",<sup>20</sup> an insight which we can relate to the way the protagonist watches the dancers through a window, his liminal perspective neither entirely in nor entirely outside the experience he is witnessing. The result, inevitably, is that he is compelled to question the nature of his situation; to consider whether the life he leads is real or "unreal".

There are occasions, such as the opening lines of "Essential Beauty", when this same instability of perception and identity is reflected in Larkin's method of description:

In frames as large as rooms that face all ways  
And block the ends of streets with giant loaves,  
Screen graves with custard, cover slums with praise  
Of motor-oil and cuts of salmon, shine  
Perpetually these sharply-pictured groves  
Of how life should be. High above the gutter  
A silver knife sinks into golden butter.<sup>21</sup>

Here the blending of images from the real world with those projected by the hoardings, when combined with Larkin's subtle manipulation of the break between lines, has the effect of foregrounding the surreal, almost hallucinatory nature of the advertisements. The boundary—or in this case the "frame"—that separates fantasy from reality becomes blurred, and it is in moments like this that we can relate the dream-like, ethereal quality of the writing to the insecurity of sense which is indicative of the *unheimlich*. Indeed, one might even suggest that the very act of reading these lines is somehow uncanny, since the poetry has the potential to displace the reader so that we too become unsure of where the line between fantasy and reality should be drawn. Like a Surrealist painting,<sup>22</sup> the poem disturbs our sense of the everyday propriety of the objects it describes; defamiliarising the ordinary, yet the extent to which we have witnessed a conflation of the ideal and the real only becomes fully apparent in the second half of the poem, when Larkin highlights the *disparity* between the images depicted in the advertisements and a more easily recognisable world "where nothing's made as new or washed quite clean". The hoardings, he observes,

Reflect none of the rained-on streets and squares

They dominate outdoors. Rather, they rise  
Serenely to proclaim pure crust, pure foam,

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<sup>20</sup>Royle, 2.

<sup>21</sup>Larkin, *CP*, 144.

<sup>22</sup>For further discussion of Larkin's relationship with Surrealism see Perry.



A voice is heard singing  
Of Kitty, or Katy,  
As if the name meant once  
All love, all beauty.<sup>29</sup>

In May 1941, Larkin walked into a bookshop in Oxford and bought his first copy of Edward Thomas's poems, subsequently describing them in a letter to his friend Jim Sutton as "Bloody nice" and "really fairly modern".<sup>30</sup> While it is impossible to know for sure what Larkin meant by calling Thomas's verse "modern",<sup>31</sup> it is worth bearing in mind, that, for Freud Hugh Haughton's observation "the uncanny is a paradoxical mark of modernity, associated as it is with moments when an author, fictional character or reader experiences the return of primitive fears and desires within an apparently modern and secular context".<sup>32</sup> Such occurrences will be extremely familiar to readers of Larkin's poetry: one thinks of the way in which the seemingly staid, sober persona of "Church Going" is suddenly surprised to discover "A hunger in himself to be more serious",<sup>33</sup> the primitive strength of this religious impulse being emphasised by his awareness of a recurring compulsion to "gravitate" towards the site of worship. Much more common is that more easily recognisable sense of the uncanny which belongs to the realm of the frightening—to that which evokes dread and horror. Larkin's enduring fear of death receives what is undoubtedly its starkest poetic expression in "Aubade", where

[...] the dread  
Of dying, and being dead,  
Flashes afresh to hold and horrify.<sup>34</sup>

As in "Church Going", we are witnessing the return of the primitive within a modern, secular context. But what is arguably even more important, and this is something that "Aubade" really brings home, is the fact that one of the most significant effects of Larkin's ever-present awareness of death—his sense of life as "slow dying"<sup>35</sup>—was to render the ordinary "unreal"; to make the objects and occurrences of everyday life appear strange and uncanny. This connection becomes clear in the final lines of "Aubade", when the narrator's focus shifts from contemplation of his mortality to a vision of a familiar and yet at the same time strangely alien world where "telephones crouch, getting ready to ring/In locked-up

<sup>29</sup>Larkin, *CP*, 178.

<sup>30</sup>See Cuthbertson, 61. Guy Cuthbertson notes that the half-crown edition of Edward Thomas's poetry purchased by Larkin was probably Faber's *The Trumpet and Other Poems*.

<sup>31</sup>Although, as Edna Longley has suggested, part of the answer surely lies in Edward Thomas's technical virtuosity and his poetry's close connection with prose. See Longley, "Any-angled Light," 115.

<sup>32</sup>Freud, xlix. We should be careful to distinguish Larkin's use of the term "modern" in relation to Edward Thomas from his later use of the term in his "Introduction to *All What Jazz*," where he argues that "the term 'modern', when applied to art, has a more than chronological meaning: it denotes a quality of irresponsibility peculiar to this century, known sometimes as modernism" (*RW*, 293).

<sup>33</sup>Larkin, *CP*, 98.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, 208.

<sup>35</sup>"Nothing to be Said," (*ibid.*, 138).



offices” and “Postmen like doctors go from house to house.”<sup>36</sup> A similar pattern emerges in the conclusion to another of Larkin’s most memorable late poems “The Building”. There the narrator suggests that, from the perspective of those who are imprisoned within the hospital walls, life on the outside is an “unreal” existence which can only temporarily obscure the reality of death:

[...] O world,  
Your loves, your chances, are beyond the stretch  
Of any hand from here! And so, unreal,  
A touching dream to which we all are lulled  
But wake from separately. In it, conceits  
And self-protecting ignorance congeal  
To carry life, collapsing when  
  
Called to these corridors.<sup>37</sup>

Even the most cursory glance through Thomas’s writing is enough to tell us that he too was susceptible to the same kind of nightmarish fears and anxieties which plagued Larkin’s imagination. His poetry is full of hauntings and sightings, half-memories and visions. In “Old Man” the rich scent of the plant gives rise to a whole series of memories and sensations, some of which are almost hallucinogenic in their intensity:

I have mislaid the key. I sniff the spray  
And think of nothing; I see and I hear nothing;  
Yet seem, too, to be listening, lying in wait  
For what I should but never can remember:  
No garden appears, no path, no hoar-green bush  
Of Lad’s love, or Old Man, no child beside,  
Neither father nor mother, nor any playmate;  
Only an avenue, dark, nameless, without end.<sup>38</sup>

Here is the same uncertainty of perception that was evident in “Ignorance” and “Essential Beauty”, but this time the protagonist’s experience is much more dark and disturbing. Indeed, his awareness of an avenue that is “without end” carries intimations of the labyrinth, of death and the void which are themselves symptomatic of the uncanny, which is terrifying precisely because it cannot be adequately explained; the *unheimlich*, Freud notes in his essay, is fundamentally concerned with “what is concealed and kept hidden”.<sup>39</sup> If we return to Larkin’s poetry we can see that this is a motif which crops up with frequent regularity: take the closing lines of “Dockery and Son” for instance, where the estranged narrator views life as being

<sup>36</sup>Larkin, *CP*, 208.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, 192, my italics.

<sup>38</sup>Thomas, *Collected Poems*, 10. All future citations from this publication are given as *ETCP*.

<sup>39</sup>Freud, 132.

governed by “what something hidden from us chose”;<sup>40</sup> “Send no Money”, with its sense of a life disfigured into “*a shape no one sees*”;<sup>41</sup> or the closing lines of “Essential Beauty”, where

[...] dying smokers sense  
Walking toward them through some dappled park  
As if on water that unfocused she  
No match lit up, nor drag ever brought near,  
Who now stands newly clear,  
Smiling, and recognising, and going dark.<sup>42</sup>

Thus we can see how the poetry of Larkin and Thomas lends itself to Freudian interpretation so uncannily because it deals in so many of the motifs that Freud uses “of seeing and failing to see, of knowing and failing to comprehend, generating a series of tensions between real and artificial, past and present.”<sup>43</sup>

Nor does the correspondence end there. As Edna Longley has pointed out, common to both poets is “the preoccupation with finding a ‘home’ in a profounder sense, the same aching consciousness of being a spiritually displaced person”<sup>44</sup>:

This is my grief. That land,  
My home, I have never seen;  
No traveller tells of it,  
However far he has been. (“Home”)<sup>45</sup>

No, I have never found  
The place where I could say  
This is my proper ground,  
Here I shall stay. (“Places, Loved Ones”)<sup>46</sup>

What Longley fails to take into account, however, is the way this estrangement from (and related longing for) home is repeatedly expressed in terms which are indicative of the *unheimlich*. Thomas’s “The New House” was inspired by the Thomas family’s move to Wick Green, Petersfield, in March 1909. It was in this house that Thomas suffered a severe nervous breakdown, brought on by overwork and financial anxiety. Again, the poem expresses that extreme uncertainty of sense which is symptomatic of the uncanny:

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<sup>40</sup>Larkin, *CP*, 153.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, 146.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, 144–5.

<sup>43</sup>Freud, *xlvi*.

<sup>44</sup>Longley, “Larkin, Edward Thomas and the Tradition,” 75. This essay was later developed into “‘Any-angled Light’: Philip Larkin and Edward Thomas.”

<sup>45</sup>Thomas, *ETCP*, 43.

<sup>46</sup>Larkin, *CP*, 99.

Now first, as I shut the door,  
     I was alone  
 In the new house; and the wind  
     Began to moan.

Old at once was the house,  
     And I was old;  
 My ears were teased with the dread  
     Of what was foretold,

Nights of storm, days of mist, without end;  
     Sad days when the sun  
 Shone in vain: old griefs and griefs  
     Not yet begun.

All was foretold me; naught  
     Could I foresee;  
 But I learned how the wind would sound  
     After these things should be.<sup>47</sup>

This poem clearly struck an emotional chord with the young Larkin, because on the 16 September 1950, on route to taking up the post of Assistant Librarian at Queens University, he wrote the uncollected fragment “Single to Belfast” (1950), in which the speaker regards himself as one

Whose world has boiled down to a berth, a bay, a meal,  
 A watch hung up to glow in the dark, voices,  
 The gravitational pull of loneliness:  
 This all was foreseen.

All was foreseen except the actual seeing:  
 My glum election to remain on deck,  
 Hearing the heave and squash of estuary water,  
 To watch the lights

Burn where so much lies shrugged off behind me like gravecloths,  
 Making a ghost of me among solid ones  
 Who cross from known to known, whereas I travel  
 To unknown from lost.<sup>48</sup>

That Larkin may have had “The New House” in mind when he wrote these lines is suggested by the way in which the refrain “All was foreseen” overtly echoes the “All was foretold” of Thomas’s poem. The connection extends beyond these feelings of foreboding to the intense loneliness of the two speakers and their sense of nebulosity. We are reminded of the ghost-like quality that surrounds the

<sup>47</sup>Thomas, *ETCP*, 47.

<sup>48</sup>Larkin, “Single to Belfast.” This poem was to remain unfinished.

protagonists of some of Larkin's most famous poems: one thinks of the "death-suited, visitant" (with its suggestion of "revenant") narrator of "Dockery and Son"; the eerie, crepuscular atmosphere that threatens to engulf the persona in "Mr Bleaney".<sup>49</sup> Far from being at home, it would seem that, right from the beginning, Larkin sensed that he would feel as ill at ease in his new environment as he had done in England, fated to remain one of what, in *The South Country*, Thomas calls "those modern people who belong nowhere".<sup>50</sup> Of course, as it turned out, the feelings of alienation Larkin experienced in Ireland were subtly and crucially different to those that he had been suffering from in England. Reflecting on his time in Belfast in "The Importance of Elsewhere", Larkin wrote:

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.<sup>51</sup>

Put simply, the importance of elsewhere—or in this case, the importance of Ireland—resides in the fact that it keeps open the possibility that home, in its fullest and most profound emotional sense, still exists, even if currently beyond reach. Once Larkin had returned to England, however, he was forced to confront the disturbing possibility that he was destined to be an outsider in his own country; to feel not-at-home in his homeland. As the narrator acknowledges in the final stanza,

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.<sup>52</sup>

Edna Longley has observed that there are occasions in Larkin's writing when England and home positively coincide: "when conditions are right for some kind of emotional or spiritual assent to the national being".<sup>53</sup> But as Longley is quick to acknowledge, such conditions, fleetingly fulfilled in "The Whitsun Weddings", are rare. The fact is that Larkin was invariably dismissive of the importance of a sense of place. Asked by Auden whether he liked living in Hull, Larkin replied that he supposed he would be just as unhappy anywhere else and the few poems written in "celebration" of the city where he spent the last thirty years of his life are notable primarily for their expression of a profound loneliness.<sup>54</sup> In "Here" the people of Humberside are

<sup>49</sup>Larkin, *CP*, 102–3.

<sup>50</sup>Thomas, *The South Country*, 5.

<sup>51</sup>Larkin, *CP*, 104.

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.* Writing to Norman Iles in 1972, Larkin reflected that, "For the last 16 years I've lived in the same small flat, [...] not having any biblical things such as wife, children, house, land, cattle, sheep etc. To me I seem very much an outsider, yet I suppose 99% of people wd say I'm very establishment and conventional. Funny, isn't it?" (*Selected Letters*, 460).

<sup>53</sup>Longley, *Poetry and Posterity*, 197.

<sup>54</sup>Quoted by Motion, 438.

A cut-price crowd, urban yet simple, dwelling  
 Where only salesmen and relations come  
 Within a terminate and fishy-smelling  
 Pastoral of ships up streets, the slave museum,  
 Tattoo-shops, consulates, grim head-scarved wives;  
 And out beyond its mortgaged half-built edges  
 Fast-shadowed wheat-fields, running high as hedges,  
 Isolate villages, where removed lives

Loneliness clarifies.<sup>55</sup>

The absence of a sense of belonging, like so many of Larkin's preoccupations, has its roots in his "unspent" childhood. In November 1940, following the German Luftwaffe's blitz on Coventry, Larkin travelled back to his home city with his friend Noel Hughes. While Hughes soon found a cousin, who told him that his parents had left the area until the emergency had passed, Larkin, fearful for his parents safety, found no one he knew, despite walking the streets surrounding the family home for a good twenty minutes in the hope of discovering news of his parents' whereabouts. Hughes later recalled:

For at least the seven years that I had known him, Philip lived at the same house, but at only one other house had he felt able to call for news of his missing parents. That done, he had shot his bolt. Later, as I got to know more about Philip's father, I could imagine how Philip could have lived for years in a neighbourhood but be reared in almost total isolation from it.<sup>56</sup>

This lack of rootedness in childhood and the resultant sense of dislocation in adulthood form the backdrop to poems like "I Remember, I Remember" and "Coming", where Larkin famously dismisses his early youth as "a forgotten boredom".<sup>57</sup> It is hardly surprising, then, that the importance of a sense of place was something which Larkin often sought to downplay.

But he couldn't leave the subject alone, returning to it time and time again in his writing. The narrator of "Mr Bleaney", another poem of Larkin's which is eerily redolent of "The New House", wonders if the previous lodger had

[...] stood and watched the frigid wind  
 Tousling the clouds, lay on the fusty bed  
 Telling himself that this was *home*, and grinned,  
 And shivered, without shaking off the dread

That how we live measures our own nature.  
 And at his age having no more to show

<sup>55</sup>Larkin, *CP*, 136.

<sup>56</sup>Hughes, "Going Home," 117.

<sup>57</sup>Larkin, *CP*, 33.

Than one hired box should make him pretty sure  
He warranted no better, I don't know.<sup>58</sup>

Here a sense of the uncanny arises from the narrator's experience of a double or an image of himself. Freud observes that "a person may identify himself with another and so become unsure of his true self"<sup>59</sup> and it is this deeply unsettling event which prompts the final awkward admission "I don't know", a phrase which hangs in the air long after we have finished reading the poem. It is worth reminding ourselves at this point that the uncanny is not merely an experience of strangeness or alienation but, more specifically, a peculiar commingling of the familiar and the unfamiliar. Despite never having met Mr Bleaney nor entered his room before, the narrator knows his habits and routines intimately:

[...]—what time he came down,  
His preference for sauce to gravy, why

He kept plugging at the four aways—  
Likewise their yearly frame: the Frinton folk  
Who put him up for summer holidays,  
And Christmas at his sister's house in Stoke.<sup>60</sup>

By putting himself in Bleaney's shoes the narrator discovers something profoundly alien at the heart of what should be a source of comfort and familiarity. Because whilst the uncanny is certainly related to the realm of the frightening—to what evokes dread and horror—that dread arises specifically from "that species of the frightening which leads back to what was once well known and had long been familiar."<sup>61</sup> In other words, our most haunting experiences of otherness tell us that the alien begins at home, wherever that may be. There can be little doubt that Larkin would have agreed with this sentiment. In an autobiographical fragment written sometime during the 1950s he revealed that,

When I try to tune into my childhood, the dominant emotions I pick up are, overwhelmingly, fear and boredom. Although I have an elder sister, the difference in our ages made me feel for practical purposes an only child, and I suppose these feelings are characteristic. As I picture him, my father was intensely shy, inhibited not robust, devoid of careless sensual instincts (though not of humour), and I don't think he did well to choose a wife of the same pattern. What kind of home did they create? I should say it was dull, pot-bound, and slightly mad. By the time I knew it, my father worked all day and shut himself away reading in the evening, or else gardened. My mother, as time went on, began increasingly to complain of her dreary life, her inability to run the house, and the approach of war. I suppose her age had something to do with it, but the monotonous whining monologue she

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., 102–3, my italics.

<sup>59</sup>Freud, 142.

<sup>60</sup>Larkin, *CP*, 102.

<sup>61</sup>Freud, 124.

treated my father to before breakfast, and all of us at mealtimes, must have remained in my mind as something that I mustn't *under any circumstances* risk encountering again.<sup>62</sup>

For Freud, the *unheimlich* is “something that was long familiar to the psyche and was estranged from it only through being repressed”<sup>63</sup> and what we find again and again in the mature poetry is that Larkin's repressed childhood—encapsulated in the motif of “home”—keeps on coming back to haunt him. It is a point which Andrew Motion makes in his biography when writing of the Christmas of 1958,

In the event, it wasn't anger [Larkin] felt when he arrived to see his mother in Loughborough but sadness—the feeling he distilled in “Home is so Sad”, which he finished on New Year's Eve after he had returned to Person Park. The poem stands as a coda to “The Whitsun Weddings” and “Self's the Man”: in the former he sees love at its most enviable; in the latter he reminds himself of its realities. Now he explains where his sense of the realities comes from: his parents. His mother's house preserves all the odds and ends (“the pictures and the cutlery./The music in the piano stool. That vase”) which represent the original good intensions of a couple making a home together. But all that remains of their “joyous shot at how things ought to be” is faded hope. What will survive of us, the poem says, is not love but the wish to love—and indelible signs of how the wish has been frustrated.<sup>64</sup>

The title of “Home is so Sad” provides an excellent example of what Motion means when, at an earlier point in the biography, he refers to the way Larkin often cast a personal conviction in the guise of a general truth.<sup>65</sup> Home isn't always sad, but Larkin invariably found it so; we don't, as in “Poetry of Departures”, “all hate home/ And having to be there”,<sup>66</sup> but Larkin sometimes did, because its sterile bourgeois atmosphere—“The good books, the good bed”<sup>67</sup>—served as a constant and unwelcome reminder of his inability to escape the unhappy legacy of his childhood.

Given his early acquaintance with Freudian theory at Oxford, where for a time he kept a record of his dreams for the purpose of self-analysis, Larkin would no doubt have been aware of how the Narcissus myth was taken up by Freud and used as a fable to explain pathological conditions of self-obsession, introversion and self-love. Freud identifies “primary narcissism” as a normal stage in infant development, differentiating it from “secondary narcissism”, a pathological state afflicting adults who are unable to form attachments or loving relationships with others and who therefore remain obsessed with themselves: “the solution to [secondary] narcissism is

<sup>62</sup>Quoted by Motion, 13–15.

<sup>63</sup>Freud, 148.

<sup>64</sup>Motion, 290.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., 214.

<sup>66</sup>“Poetry of Departures” (Larkin, *CP*, 85).

<sup>67</sup>Ibid.

to love another.”<sup>68</sup> However, it would seem that the open expression of love was something which did not come easily to Larkin, perhaps as a result of not having been encouraged to show such feelings at an early age. In an interview with the *Observer* in 1979, Larkin said: “Probably both my parents were rather shy people—of each other, of their children.”<sup>69</sup> James Booth has noted Larkin’s difficulty with “letting someone in”<sup>70</sup> and it is reasonable to assume that a self that is insecure in its identity is more likely to close protectively against the outside world. Writing to Monica Jones in 1966, Larkin admitted: “It’s my own unwillingness to give myself to anyone that’s at fault.”<sup>71</sup> Tellingly, in Edward Thomas’s poetry the sense of having “come home” is inextricably linked a sense of having come home:

Not like a pewit that returns to wail  
For something it has lost, but like a dove  
That slants unswerving to its home and love. (“Beauty”)<sup>72</sup>

Although this connection is never made explicit, it is no less central to Larkin’s work. But it is all too rarely affirmed. In “An Arundel Tomb” the hope that “what will survive of us his love” is undercut by the entwined hands of the stone couple having been “transfigured [...] into/Untruth”,<sup>73</sup> while in “Love Again” the estranged narrator asks despairingly:

[...] why put it into words?  
Isolate rather this element

That spreads through other lives like a tree  
And sways them on in a sort of sense  
And say why it never worked for me.  
Something to do with violence  
A long way back, and wrong rewards,  
And arrogant eternity.<sup>74</sup>

Larkin’s attribution of the origin of his limited capacity for love remains unambiguous. As he writes in one of his most moving poems, “Faith Healing”:

[...] In everyone there sleeps  
A sense of life lived according to love.  
To some it means the difference they could make

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<sup>68</sup>Holmes, 183.

<sup>69</sup>Larkin, *RW*, 48. A note in Larkin’s manuscript book, dated May 1949, reads: “In our family/Love was disgusting as lavatory,/And not as necessary” (Hull University Archives, Notebook 2).

<sup>70</sup>Booth, 22.

<sup>71</sup>Larkin, *Selected Letters*, 386.

<sup>72</sup>Thomas, *ETCP*, 35–6.

<sup>73</sup>Larkin, *CP*, 111.

<sup>74</sup>*Ibid.*, 215.



By loving others, but across most it sweeps  
 As all they might have done had they been loved.  
 That nothing cures.<sup>75</sup>

Larkin's susceptibility to experiences which we can think of in terms of the *unheimlich* was intimately connected to his awareness of "all they might have done had they been loved", for he was a man rendered radically, and chronically, uncertain about his identity partly by an upbringing that denied him any lovingly maternal or paternal confirmation of himself, with his poetry functioning and flourishing as a form of release for what he was unable to express in his everyday life.

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<sup>75</sup>Ibid., 126.

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