CHAPTER V

TIME AND DEATH

> There are the elements, which seem to mock at all human control... the storm which drives all before it; there are the diseases, which we have only lately recognized as the attacks of other living creatures; and finally there is the painful riddle of death, for which no remedy at all has yet been found, nor probably ever will be.
>
> (Freud, The Future of an Illusion 27)

The two most important ideas with which Larkin is deeply concerned in his poetry are time and death. They keep recurring in various images and give a philosophical orientation to his poetry. The mystery of the flux of time leading to decay and death has been puzzling mankind ever since the first civilization started to take shape in primitive societies. Yet no one can claim a complete understanding of the phenomenon of the passing of time carrying man to his inevitable end. Larkin, despite his interest in every-day human problems of love, sex and family relationships, remains extremely involved in the question of the ultimate human destiny in the end of life.

In the twentieth century man is more preoccupied with the issue of the transience of life and the riddle of death than in

the previous ages. In this century time and death seem to be the focal point not only of literature but almost all fields of knowledge. This can be attributed to many factors: the two world wars and their calamitous consequences; the fear of nuclear war; lack of Stoicism on the part of human beings; lack of faith in religion; and general mood of scepticism prevalent everywhere. Added to these, failure of various philosophical systems to provide appropriate answers to deeper psychological needs of man also contributed to his consciousness of time and death. As John Press says, "death may well appear more terrible to us than in most ages of the past" (4).

Philip Larkin, who truthfully presents the psychological reality of man in the present age of fear and gloom, seems to be more preoccupied with the enigma of the passing of time and with death than the other poets of his time. Since he is a poet who depicts reality as it exists rather than what it ought to be he seems to be more naturally concerned with the reality of death and with the passing of time toward it than with any wish-fulfilling fantasies. The bulk of his poetry centres round the theme of time and death. Thus his treatment of such a theme is part of his awareness of the reality principle. In his poetry death falls within the scope of "beyond the pleasure principle." He is quite different from any of the earlier poets and even from Hardy whose poetry he appreciated because it dealt with "time and the passing of time" (RW 175). Larkin does not entertain any illusion about time and death. He does not believe in the immortality of soul or life after death. To him life is defined

by its temporality; when time stops for man his life comes to an end. For him there is no method by which fleeting time can be conquered:

> What are days for?
> Days are where we live.
> They come, they wake us
> Time and time over.
> They are to be happy in:
> Where can we live but, days?
>
> ("Days" 67)

The two rhetorical questions in the first and last line of this stanza indicate that there is no other dimension for man than time. The succession of days is no more than man's journey towards his destiny.

Larkin's awareness of the flux of time and death is present in some of his early poems too which are supposed to have been written by a pleasure-seeking young poet. In these poems time and death are present in the consciousness of the young man through romantic images from nature, such as the journey of a ship, the blowing wind, and the image of the moon. In the poem "The North Ship," which is a serious contemplation on death as an inescapable reality, Larkin uses the sea and ships as metaphors of life. In this poem Larkin presents a legend of three ships, one of which never returns to the shore. It is "rigged for a long journey to the north (north in Anglo-Saxon literature stands for darkness, death and evil) through the "darkening sea":

The third ship drove towards the north,
Over the sea, the darkening sea,
But no breath of wind came forth,
And the decks shone frostily.

(302)

The journey of this ship is, in fact, everyman's journey to the land of death from where no one returns.

From the very moment of his birth man has been moving silently and slowly towards his fate. He is taken stealthily towards his grave by the invisible move of time. This seems to be the substance of most of Larkin's major poetry. The poem "This was your place of birth, this daytime palace" deals with this theme directly. The first stanza presents the occasion of birth and the freshness of youth, full of mirth and sunshine. But life is not static in its glory and splendour; it is in a continual move and "The clouds cast Moving shadow on the land." Life moves on under the operative law of the flux towards its inevitable fate. The poet asks every one to prepare himself/herself for that end:

Are you prepared for what the night will bring?
The stranger who will never show his face,
But asks admittance, will you greet your doom
As final.

(265)

The poet does not deal with death in religious terms. As an empiricist he has no illusions about the substantiality of death as negation of life. Therefore, when he asks his readers to be prepared for death, he is not asking them to celebrate the occasion of the arrival of death as a grand event of life, as a sort of finale. In the poem "Dawn" he employs similar metaphors to suggest that time in its monotonous pace carries life forward in the process of the succession of days and nights:

> To wake, and hear a cock
> Out of the distance crying
> To pull the curtains back
> And see the clouds flying.
>
> (284).

Larkin's views of life and death are similar to those of the astronomer poet Omar Khayyam. In the third quartrain of Rubaiyat Omar Khayyam says:

> And, as the cock crew, those who stood before
> The Tavern shouted, open then the Door!
> You know how little while we have to stay,
> And, once departed, may return no more.
>
> (Fitzgerald's translation)

The sound of the cock in the early morning is more a reminder that one night has passed than a signal for the advent of a new day of splendour. It indicates that man's age has decreased by a day. The speedy move of the clouds in Larkin's poem resembles

the move of life, which is as rapid and as transient as the clouds.

The image of the blowing wind in the poem "Winter" refers similarly to the chilling and deteriorating effect of time on man. In the first stanza the wind blows over the waste of thistles:

> While the wind blows over
> A waste of thistles
> Crowded like men;
> And now again
> My thoughts are children
> With uneasy faces
> That awake and rise
> Beneath running skies
> From buried places.
>
> (286)

In this stanza the thistles are compared to men and suggest that the impact of the wind, like the flux of time, is ubiquitous. In the next stanza the wind blows over the crowd of men who are chilled and shrivelled like the thistles under the impact of the wind:

> Then the whole heath whistles
> In the leaping wind,
> And shrivelled men stand
> Crowding like thistles
> To one fruitless place;
>
> (286)

Larkin employs nature as an "objective correlative" for the human world. In its gaiety and colour, growth and transience, nature resembles life. In the poem "Sad Music" the poet uses nature to demonstrate the ephemerality of life. The poet uses night as a setting to indicate that the night music is an invisible thing which creeps silently while people are absorbed in their dreams. In their absorption into a dream world they do not hear the music of the night and are thus unaware of the reality principle represented in the act of the continuous flux of time:

> Long since had the living
> By a thin twine
> Been led into their dreams
> Where lanterns shine
> Under a still veil
> Of falling streams;
> .....
> There were no mouths
> To drink of the wind.
>
> '(300)

The wind which symbolically stands for the speedy move of time cannot be conquered or stopped; it will continue on its journey till it takes man to his end.

Larkin suggests that the first lesson which man has to understand is that time is a tool in the hands of death or a witness of death in its destructive operation. This is the theme of the poem "This is the first thing." The speaker in the poem

makes an analogy between the sound of an axe cutting the trees and the sound of death harvesting the souls of people. The echo of death's action is time or time is the executor of the task of Thanatos:

> This is the first thing
> I have understood:
> Time is an echo of an axe
> Within a wood.
>
> (295)

The speaker here is deeply engrossed in his thought about time. Trying to understand its complex nature and operation, he defines it as the echo of an action. According to him the real action, which is archetypal, is done by death. As Timms says, the poet, in this short yet expressive poem is "concerned more about time's effect on people than on trees" (33).

The same concern with decay and death is the subject-matter of the poem "Pour away that youth." The speaker in this poem pleads that death is man's ultimate reality. The speaker advises the young to shake off their "youth" that hangs so powerfully like "a jewel in the head" and "bronze in the breath" and wait for the "bones truth":

> Pour away that youth
> That overflows the heart
> Into hair and mouth;

Take the grave's part,

Tell the bones truth.

(297)

The speaker says that the "luxuriant" youth tend to forget the reality of death. The lesson which he wants to convey is that death is inevitable and unavoidable and its reality should never be ignored.

The more Larkin is curious about the nature of death the more he is puzzled about it. He suggests that in spite of man's capacity to understand the other mysteries of the macrocosm, he is still in complete ignorance of many things among which death stands first. He deals with this theme in the poem "Ignorance." He suggests in this poem that man is in a confused state and is caught by the illusory affairs of life. Even at the time of death he is not able to unravel life's mystery:

Yes, it is strange
Even to wear such knowledge - for our flesh
Surrounds us with its own decisions -
And yet spend all our life on imprecisions,
That when we start to die
Have no idea why.

(107)

The grim reality of their every-day affairs and socio-psychological pressures make people submit everything to time and to seek solace in future prospects. Larkin wants to make his readers aware that these futuristic hopes are unrealistic and

deceptive. He says that the future brings only old age, distortion, and death; it makes people victims of frustration and alienation. This insight can be seen at work in a number of poems in his mature phase like "Next please," "Triple Time," "Arrivals Departures" and so on. When a person, he implies, is deprived of certain opportunities or when his desires are not fulfilled, he looks at the future as a compensation. But this habit of expectancy in the course of time proves ultimately to be illusory and deceptive. Larkin stultifies this bad habit of expectancy and nursing of hopes for the future in the poem "Next Please." The poem works through the metaphor of three ships loaded with hopes of a brighter future that could redress the painful present. As Simon Petch remarks, we are "tempted to expect the future to compensate for the deficiencies and disappointments of the past" (43). The future on which man puts all his hopes proves to be a mirage:

> Always too eager for the future, we
> Pick up bad habits of expectancy.
> Something is always approaching; every day
> Till then we say.
>
> (52)

The poem further develops this idea about the habit of expectancy by using the image of a man watching from a cliff the vast ocean which carries the "sparkling armada of promises." These promises of youth are the promises of the pleasure principle. But when these promises are not fulfilled we think

that the "deficiencies of the present day will be supplied by the morrow" (Rasselas, quoted by Simon Petch 43). But, as Larkin implies, we are wrong because the ship proves to be an illusion. We expected it to be a ship of the pleasure principle which promised happiness but in fact it turns out to be a ship of disillusionment and frustration. That is why, Larkin thinks that it is a mistake to expect the future to bring happiness and to provide solution to human problems:

> We think each one will heave to and unload
> All good into our lives, all we are owed
> For waiting so devoutly and so long.
> But we are wrong:
> Only one ship is seeking us, a black
> Sailed unfamiliar, towing at her back
> A huge and birdless silence. In her wake
> No waters breed or break.
>
> (52)

The only ship which fulfils its promise by reaching the shore is an empty one. It is the ship of death which always approaches us with certainty and plainness. Thus within a short time our anticipated future turns into a regretted past. As soon as the ship of death approaches, man's hopes dissolve. This is what happens always to a man who dreams of the future as a comfortable compensation for the lapses of the past. O'Connor rightly calls the poem as "one of the most finely-wrought images of death in all of English poetry" (24). This poem can be regarded as a powerful reply to those who charge Larkin of being insular and a

personal poet with a narrow poetic vision. David Timms says that "When Larkin's poems do strive after a universal statement, they work best" (72). This poem shows clearly that man in pursuit of good results is always tormented and defeated by time. Bruce Martin remarks, "Just as one ship proves to be illusion, so does the presumed time of its arrival, which immediately turns from an anticipated future to regretted past" (47). The poem suggests that there is only one definite thing for everybody and that is death.

P.R.King remarks that at the heart of Larkin's poetry lies "a constant awareness of the passing of time and a belief that man is always in thrall to time. Time strips us of illusions and is the bearer of realities which we would prefer to avoid"(6). The poem "Triple Time" discusses time as a great adversary which shatters to pieces the pleasure principle represented by the dream of a better future. In this poem Larkin suggests that time is inherent in the human mind. Adopting a psychological point of view, he perceives the present in its utter ephemerality. Since time flows continuously, the present is in constant process of disintegration and change. The present, which was future in the past, is itself empty:

> This empty street, this sky to blandness scoured,
> This air, a little indistinct with autumn
> Like a reflection, constitute the present -
> A time traditionally soured,
> A time unrecommended by event.
>
> (73)

In the second stanza Larkin says that the present moment was seen in the past as the future and yet when it appears it does not give what it promised. In his childhood or youth man had many dreams and desires but the future of the past which is the present is full of disappointments:

> But equally they make up something else:
> This is the future furthest childhood saw
> Between long houses, under travelling skies,
> Heard in contending bells-
> An air lambent with adult enterprise.
>
> (73)

The houses which were considered to be full of hopes in the childhood are now desolate and full of sorrow under the flux of time represented by travelling skies. In the last stanza the personal pronoun "we" refers to a collective experience. Man regrets that he could not reap the fruit in his past and thus was cruel to himself by losing chances. But Larkin thinks that whether one seizes or loses chances the end result is the same. This deterministic finality of the end is the ultimate goal of life.

In the poem "Arrivals, Departures" Larkin develops the theme of the inscrutable relationship between time and death. The poet here uses again the metaphor of the ship to present the journey of life. As an outsider, the speaker looks at the continuous traffic of ships and hears the wailing sound of the ship's sirens:

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

(65)

There are two ships blowing horn in the poem. The horn that blows in the morning announces the arrival of a new ship, which is an indication of birth. It seems to say, "Come and choose wrong." The ship that blows siren in the evening marks the departure, which symbolizes the inevitability of exit of life:

... At night again they sound,
Calling the traveller now, the outward bound:
O not for long, they cry, O not for long.

(65)

The theme of the consciousness of time and death is also taken up in the poem "Going." The speaker in this poem sees the arrival of a very unusual evening through the fields.

There is an evening coming in
Across the fields, one never seen before,
That lights no lamps.

(3)

The absence of light represents the fear of death that paralyzes the body. The evening stands for the receding light - the end of life. The domain of death is most horrifying because it is

totally unknown and incomprehensible to imagination. The insensate effects of death is presented clearly in the following lines:

> Where has the tree gone, that locked
> Earth to the sky? What is under my hands,
> That I cannot feel?
>
> (3)

Similar concerns with death and finality of life are exploited more imagistically in the poem "Age." "Age," as its title indicates, is about the flow of time towards death. The speaker has crossed the period of his maturity and is moving towards his grave. He sees his role in the world as "a lighted tenement scuttling with voices" and views life as a "tall game" which requires toiling efforts from its participants:

> My age fallen away like white swaddling
> Floats in the middle distance, becomes
> An inhabited cloud. I bend closer, discern
> A lighted tenement scuttling with voices.
> O you tall game I tried myself with joining!
> Now I wade through you like knee-level weeds,
>
> (95)

Since the speaker is not involved in the worldly affairs he endears himself to silence and space. He fondly addresses them as "translucent bergs."

A more metaphoric presentation of the vainglory of life, of ageing, and of death is made in the poem "At Grass." The poet uses in this poem the image of two race horses whose past was glorious and who are now retired and kept in a cold centre where they wait for oblivion. Through their fate the poet depicts the condition of man who passes from glory to oblivion in a deterministic process of transformation. The speaker stresses the word "anonymous" to indicate the pathetic condition of man who ultimately becomes stripped and bare at the end of his life's journey. The condition of the retired race horses provides a fitting analogy to the condition of man:

> The eye can hardly pick them out
> From the cold shade they shelter in,
> Till wind distresses tail and mane;
> Then one crops grass, and moves about
> - The other seeming to look on-
> And stands anonymous again.
>
> (29)

"Fifteen years ago" these horses were celebrated and their photographs were idealized. They were applauded and legends were built about their qualities. When their day of power and "pleasure principle" ended they had to face reality on a cold heath. The image of these two horses is similar to the one of an overthrown king or a ruler who waits mechanically for the punishment. To extend the analogy a little further, this image is similar to Lear's image at the end of Shakespeare's play. The poem, as Salem Hassan remarks, emphasizes the "idea that the

horses are lapsing into oblivion and then death, a quality which appeals to anyone and suggests human fate" (24). The phrase "evening come" at the end suggests the inevitability of their fate which, by extension, may mean the fate of human beings.

If death is the ultimate reality that one has to face, any human action can be explained as part of the process of dying. This is the theme of the poem "Nothing to be Said." The title implies that the situation is so terribly sad that it leaves "nothing to be said." The speaker observes everything in life sliding slowly towards death and all the escape routes against death are closed. Larkin suggests that death does not discriminate among people according to rank, colour, or caste. He observes various people like "small-statured cross-faced tribes" and "cobble-close families" and finds them drifting slowly towards their final fate. "Life is a slow dying" cryptically sums up this condition.

> So are their separate ways
> Of building, benediction,
> Measuring love and money
> Ways of slow dying.
>
> (138)

The painful awareness of the flux of time and of the process of ageing is expressed more elaborately in the poems like "How Distant" and "Sad Steps." In "How Distant" the speaker, while looking back at his days past, feels that he is far from being young. He comes to know that youth has forsaken him because of

the rapid movement of time. Therefore he feels that he has become unfit for any work which requires effort and adventure:

> This is being young
> Assumption of the startled century
> Like new store clothes,
> The huge decisions printed out by feet.
> Inventing where they tread,
> The random windows conjuring a street.
>
> (62)

The poet clearly knows that he cannot return to such a state of glory since the gulf between him and youth is widened by the lapse of time.

In "Sad Steps" the speaker observes the clean moon dashing through the clouds after four o'clock. He describes the glory of the moon as "lozenge of love." But this image is also a reminder of the painful fact that youth is transitory. It will fade and cannot be recovered. Whereas in the poem "Solar" the poet uses the image of the sun for such transience, here he uses that of the moon. The sun and the moon stand for the passage of time, the time measured by the astronomers. The poem also emphasizes the solitariness of the speaker. His solitariness is heightened by the "far-reaching singleness" of the moon "under a cavernous, wind-pecked sky." The moon reminds the speaker of his youth which has vanished:

> Lozenge of love! Medallion of art!

O Wolves of memory! Immensements! No,
One shivers slightly, looking up there.

(169)

This shiver, as Terry Whalen says, "states his chagrin about transience, failure and old age" (69). There lies a vast empty space between him and the moon, suggesting, according to Salem Hassan, "a vast space of years between him and his youth" (100). The moon is "a reminder of the strength and pain/of being young." But the ageing speaker knows that "it can't come again to him."

In the poem "Dry Point," as we have discussed in chapter four, the entire spectrum of man's life from the moment of his conception to his death is described metaphorically through the art of etching. In the third stanza of the poem man finds himself surrounded with the difficulties in life. But in the fourth stanza Larkin abandons the metaphor of life and turns to deal with death and after-life. The use of the plural personal pronoun "we" indicates that death is the destiny waiting for everyone. The speaker implies that no one can solve the mystery and the riddle of death and after-life:

And how remote that bare and sunscrubbed room,
Intensely far, that padlocked cube of light
We neither define nor prove,
Where you, we dream, obtain no right of entry.

(37)

In "Dockery and Son," as we have seen, the speaker uses the train journey to represent the journey of life. In a dream like

technique he narrates how he falls asleep and wakes up at Sheffield:

> I feel asleep, waking at the fumes
> And furnace-glares of Sheffield, where I changed,
> And ate an awful pie, and walked along
> The platform to its end....
>
> (152)

The platform represents the life-span for the speaker which he wants to explore. At the end of the platform he sees two rail lines, one is joining and the other is parting, which suggest the beginning and end of life. By using the metaphor of the railroad the poet implies that whatever may be the trajectory of life it arrives at a fixed point, which is the point of destination. Dockery thought that giving birth to a son was a kind of protection against fate; it was an assurance for life's continuity. Yet for the speaker the act of giving birth is nothing but submission to fate. Since the newly-born will follow the same course of joining and parting, he cannot escape from the inscrutable condition of existence. As Freud would say, a son "gives no invulnerable armour against the arrows of fate" (Civilization and its Discontents 34). In the last stanza the speaker says that since life ends in death it is simply a bundle of misery and unforeseen circumstances:

> Life is first boredom, then fear.
> Whether or not we use it, it goes,
> And leaves what something hidden from us chose,

And age, and then the only end of age.

(153)

These lines close the poem with a note of finality, i.e., life begins as boredom and ends as death. In Brownjohn's words, "all human expectations were pathetic delusion and folly, betrayed by the hidden forces pushing death inexorably closer" ("The Deep Blue Air" 854).

The beauty of nature which Larkin celebrated in his early poems as a source of pleasure is now looked upon as unwelcoming beacuse of the poet's awareness of the transience of life. In the poem "The Trees" greenness, which is usually associated with joy, is linked with grief for its short-livedness. Although the trees seem to announce their freshness every spring loudly, Larkin thinks of such announcement deceptive. In fact, he thinks that, like a human being, the tree is mortal and its age is recorded by the rings inside its trunks:

Is it that they are born again
And we grow old ? No, they die too
Their yearly trick of looking new
Is written down in rings of grain.

(166)

The poem implies that both the living and non-living objects are subject to change brought about by time.

The poem is written in traditional stanzaic and metrical form. In each stanza the first line rhymes with the last and the

second rhymes with the third. In fact, this rhyming is not decorative; it is functional. The rhyme shows that the "leaf" is a symbol of "grief" since it is going to wither and fade. The rhyming of "again" and "grain" indicates that the real age of the trees is recorded in the rings of grain. "Thresh" rhyming with "afresh" indicates an analogy between a castle and the trees. The kings strengthen their castles as a bulwark against death and, in a similar way, the trees freshen themselves every spring in an attempt to conquer death. But in both cases attempts are futile. While discussing Goethe's "Mephistopheles," Freud says that the "power in nature" works towards "the creation and renewal of life that is Eros" (Civilization and Its Discontents 100). But Larkin provides a counter-argument to this thesis by suggesting that the power of Eros to preserve and renew nature is already thwarted by Thanatos.

The poem "Cut Grass" extends the argument began in "The Trees." The speakers in both the poems ruminate over the mortality of plants which they link up with human mortality. The idea of mortality is suggested by the "mawn" grass in summer which dies "in the white hours" as soon as the leaves start to appear in June. The early death of the newly-blossomed flowers, buds and leaves indicates that all good things are subject to decay :

> It dies in the white hours
> Of young-leafed June
> With chestnut flowers,
> With hedges snowlike strewn. (183)

The speaker is sad since he knows that the fate of flowers and of man are the same. This theme about the linkage between man and nature in terms of their mortality is exploited more fully in "Afternoons." This is worked out through the depiction of the emotional miseries of middle-aged housewives (who are also mothers). Time leaves its indelible imprint on these house-wives. The title of the poem implies the progression of time through an inexorable process of transformation. The noon with its warmth has given way to the gloom of the afternoon which changes into the evening. This continuity of transformation of time provides a paradigm for life which too changes unobtrusively.

The first stanza of the poem suggests that summer, which stands for youth and virility, is fading. Its fading marks a transition from a desirable state of pleasure to a non-desirable one. The "ing" form, which is a progressive verb, implies that the fading action is in progress; the happy present is gradually giving way to an unhappy future:

> Summer is fading:
> The leaves fall in ones and twos
> From trees bordering
> The new recreation ground.
> In the hollows of afternoons
> Young mothers assemble
> At swing and sandpit
> Setting free their children.
>
> (121)

The summer is treated poetically as one of the colours (seasons) on the canvas of the year which is growing paler and paler every moment. The growing paleness suggests that the autumn is fast approaching which will be followed by the winter. So a pleasant present is soon going to be followed by an unpleasant future. It clearly indicates the changes that are taking place in women. They are getting less and less attractive with every passing day and their beauty is fast giving way to ugliness. The falling of leaves in "ones or twos" suggests not only the passing of time but also sadness and death. It also brings into light the instability of nature and its cyclic process of change. Perhaps the poet is trying through this change in nature to set the context in which social and family life may be seen. That means, the duration of the pleasure of family life is as uncertain and short as that of summer and its beauty.

In the second stanza the poet considers the mechanical patterns of life in retrospect and prospect and discovers how life has all been subjected to persistent decay and how the negativity of time symbolized by the "wind" has immensely added to its hollowness and meaninglessness:

> Behind them, at intervals,
> Stands husbands in skilled trades,
> An estateful of washing,
> And the albums, lettered
> Our Wedding , lying
> Near the television:

Before them, the wind

Is running their courting-places.

(121)

The pharse "skilled trades" indicates that husbands, under the difficult condition of living and the passing of time, have ceased to be lovers or fathers and that their identities do not exist without their skill in trades : means of earning food to keep the bodies alive. They appear to be tools, used in trade, not persons. They seem to be related to the idea of a happy past when they were lovers and fathers but with the change of time they have become just skilled traders. By telescoping the background into the foreground the poet suggests the inextricability of time and death. "Albums" and "television" imply that they are related to pictures and images. While the album implies the images of a romantic past never to be brought back, the television suggests the unreal scenes of the present concealing the stark reality of life.

In the final stanza the poetic argument culminates with the suggestion of the approaching old age which is to be followed by death:

That are still courting-places

(But the lovers are all in school)

And their children, so intent on

Finding more unripe acorns,

Expect to be taken home.

Their beauty has thickened.

Something is pushing them

To the side of their own lives.

(121)

The uninteresting routines of life consume all the pleasant time of the mothers and even before they are aware of the situation they have already reached a point of no return. This statement about mothers is generally applicable to all human beings.

Although there is nothing wrong about the "courting places," the mothers have now grown old and unattractive. In the last two lines, "Something pushing them/To the side of their life," the speaker indicates that the mothers have moved out of the centre and have passed their middle age. This fact highlights the inevitability of the sad denouement of human life. It also suggests the contrast between the youth and old age.

It is highly significant that in this poem mainly two forms of present tense, i.e., present simple and the present continous, are used. This usage implies a kind of universality of attitude to time. The use of present tense suggests that the specific situation that the poet deals with has a sense of continuity and carries a time-free, non-contingent dimension. At the end of the poem the use of the present perfect tense suggests that the youth and its attributes are over and old age has come for the mothers who used to be once young.

In the poem "Ambulances" Larkin makes fun of the "ambulances" which are expected to provide relief to the sick. The speaker says that, like the confessionals which the priest

administers to give relief to the sinners, the ambulances are a kind of illusion. Bruce Martin calls them "objects of universal curiosity and awe" (79) which move about in the streets in search of suffering men. The very sight of an ambulance creates panic in the onlookers. According to Simon Petch, "As they flash past us on their way to someone else's disaster we hardly stop to consider the implication of the chilling impersonality they represent" (74). People are so engrossed in their daily inanities that they hardly pay any attention to time and mutability, but as soon as they come across an ambulance their rhythm of daily life is suddenly disrupted and they are reminded of death. The terrible effect of the ambulances on the onlookers is vividly brought out in the following lines:

> The children strewn on steps or road,
> Or women coming from the shops
> Past smells of different dinners, see
> A wild white face that overtops
> Red stretcher-blankets momently
> As it is carried in and stowed.
>
> (132)

Larkin depicts death here through its several visual and iconic manifestations. He calls death "solving emptiness" because it puts to an end all the worries and frustrations of man:

> And sense of the solving emptiness
> That lies just under all we do,
> And for a second get it whole.

So permanent and black and true.

The fastened doors recede. Poor soul

They whisper at their own distress.

(132)

As P. R. King suggests, "It is the awareness of the coming of death which dissolves any posibility of our dreams becoming reality" (37). The beauty of this poem lies in its direct and simple style that communicates the content powerfully. David Timms's comment is quite relevant. According to him, "death seems to defy figurative expressions to come to terms with it, as if no manipulation of language can have more impact than the fact itself" (100). In fact, it is the language of the reality principle that needs no embellishment.

The poem "The Building" is more explicit and more elaborate in its treatment of the theme of death. It is about desolation, illness and death. Its central metaphor is the majastic hospital-building where the entire human affair of life and death takes place. But the building has less to do with birth than with death. The children are born here to die. The poem is an elegy on the hospital. It begins with a typically dense and carefully-select sort of details so organized that one gradually realizes that the place so described is a hospital. The building serves as a "symbol for the sign of all the patients which amounts to a desperate cry in the face of death" (Hassan 108). The poem begins with a description of an expansive, hospital building which at first appears to be either a hotel or an airport lounge:

Higher than the handsomest hotel
The lucent comb shows up for miles, but see,
All round it close-ribbed streets rise and fall
Like a great sigh out of the last century.

(191)

The atmosphere of fear is created by such bleak details which, in their accumulated intensity, suggest the presence of death. The way men are sitting "tamely" with "faces restless and resigned" on the benches in the waiting hall implies that there is a sense of uncertainty and of resignation to fate. Larkin reflects upon such a situation in a philosophical way :

. . . . Humans, caught
On ground curiously neutral, homes and names
Suddenly in abeyance; some are young,
Some old, but most at that vague age that claims
The end of choice the last of hope; . . .

(191)

The sick have mutual compassion for each other as they realize that all of them are sharing the same fate and sailing in the same boat. They have thronged this place with the hope that they will be cured of their diseses, but when they look at each other and share their misfortune with a sense of togetherness they realize finally that they have no hope. Thus the hospital fails to become a symbol of hope for them but becomes one of disappointment :

. . . . All know they are going to die.
Not yet, perhaps not here, but in the end,
And somewhere like this. That is what it means,
This clean-sliced cliff, a struggle to transcend
The thought of dying.

(193)

Larkin employs the metaphor of the hospital to suggest that the whole world is like a hospital where people come to die. As Terry Whalen remarks, the hospital building expresses modern man's vain attempts "to outbuild death with a new faith in medicine and technology." "The hospital is a natural symbol not of healing, but the undeniable fact of death" (Whalen 103). The hospital fails to provide any answer as the church. On the contrary, it becomes a veritable symbol of death. The image of the "locked church" in the sixth stanza suggests that religion is also in decline and the handful of "wasteful weak, propitiatory flowers" in the last stanza cannot mitigate the misery of man:

. . . unless its powers
Outbuild cathedrals nothing contravens
The coming dark, though crowds each evening try
With wasteful, weak, propitiatory flowers.

(193)

So Larkin thinks that it is neither the church nor the hospital which can offer any succour to humanity.

Larkin's conception of death is more psychological than physical. Although death brings life to a physical close, he is more interested in its psychological impact on man than in its finality. He compares death with walls which trap life and curtail the possibility of movement. To him the consciousness of death is more disastrous than death as a one-time phenomenon. The invisible presence of death through its various messengers makes it a continuous possibility. In the poem "Myxomatosis" the poet visualizes the limit of death as the deadly disease of the mucous membrane which attacked and virtually eliminated the rabbit population in one section of England. To the poet the fortuitous devastation and its inescapability is a symbol of man's suffering under the horrible pressure of death:

> Caught in the centre of a soundless field
> While hot inexplicable hours go by
> What trap is this? Where were its teeth concealed?
> You seem to ask.
>
> (100)

The speaker kills the suffering rabbit to save it from further torture. This condition of the rabbits "trapped" by death illuminates the existential situation of the human being caught in a similar way.

Larkin is different in his treatment of old age from the poets who wrote about the same subject before him. He does not see any hope for man in his old age. Unlike Browning in "Rabbi Ben Ezra" and Yeats in "Sailing to Byzantium" who treated old age

with sympathy and hope, Larkin calls old men "Old Fools" in the dark tragedy of life. The pleasure principle of the youthful days has been replaced by the "death-watch" of the old age. The poem "The Old Fools" opens with a series of questions that do not need any answers. These questions imply that to the poet no answer is needed about the enigma of human life. The poet has discovered answers long ago and asks these questions only to emphasize their rhetorical stance. In the first stanza Larkin gives a repulsive image of old men. Just like beating a person to bring him back to his senses, the speaker goes on hammering a series of questions:

> What do they think has happened, the old fools,
> To make them like this ? Do they somehow suppose
> It's more grown-up when your mouth hangs open
> and drools,
> And you keep on pissing yourself, and can't remember
> Who called this morning? (196)

In their physical full-bloodedness and agility young men never anticipate that they will be reduced to nothingness much before their fatal end comes:

> Or that, if they only choose,
> They could alter things back to when they
> danced all night,
> Or went to their wedding, or slopped arms
> some September?
> Or do they fancy there's really been no

change,
And they've always behaved as if they were
crippled or tight,
Or sat through days of thin continuous
dreaming
Watching light move?
(196)

In the second stanza the speaker presents death as the eroding end of life in which everything is shattered and turned into oblivion for ever. Here Larkin's view of death is more or less that of a scientist to whom death is only a physical event leading to the disintegration of the body. According to A.N.Wilson, "Larkin had an absolute conviction that death was nothing but extinction" (24). The following lines illustrate this simple axiom:

At death you break up: the bits that were you
Start speeding away from each other for ever
With no one to see. It's only oblivion, true;
We had it before, but then it was going to end,
And was all the time merging with a unique endeavour.
To bring to gloom the million-petalled flower
Of being here.

(196)

The poignancy of the poem is enhanced when death is counterpointed against the "endeavour to bring to bloom the million petalled flower" in the youth. The third and the fourth

stanzas are explanations of the psychic state of the old people. The events of the past reel before them and only provide contrast to the futile present they have been condemned to live in:

> Perhaps being old is having lighted rooms
> Inside your head, and people in them, acting,
> People you know, yet can't quite name:' each looms
> Like a deep lose restored . . . .
>
> (196)

The speaker declares the bitter truth about old age because gradually he foresees in himself that truth. He says further that the old live "not here and now but where all happened once." While commenting on this line Clive James says that "the idea takes some of its force from our awareness that that's largely where Larkin lives already- only his vision could lead to the death" (58). In the last stanza, however, the speaker's tone becomes considerably compassionate, as he starts to contemplate on the common fate of man. The tone of disgust and anger of the first stanza is changed now to that of empathy and understanding. The use of the pronoun "We" in the last line suggests that we too share the final common fate of the old fools. Day Roger's comment on the last line is pertinent:

> The tone of the last five words is quite different from the rest of the poem; the anger gives way to grim and threatening certainty in which the speaker finally identifies himself with the "Old Fools." (38)

Though death is presented as something horrible in Larkin's poetry, this poem carries an implicit faith in the loving aspect of death as it brings to a close a life of agony and frustration. Larkin seems to say indirectly what Freud said in Civilization and Its Discontents:

> And what do we gain by long life when it is full of hardship and starved of joys and so wretched that we can only welcome death as our deliverer. (Freud 48)

The bleakness of life and its meaninglessness mixed with the fear of death remained Larkin's life-long obsession. In the last few years before his death he wrote the most significant poems like "Aubade" and "The Dedicated" which demonstrate his resigned attitude to and awareness of his approaching death. Before he died, he had a sense of his ending, a kind of premonition. The poem "Aubade" is one of the bleakest poems in the twentieth century. It is Larkin's own elegy, or confession of his fear of death. In this poem he mourns his own death. Once he told Betjamen: "Everything I write, I think, has the consciousness of approaching death in the background" (Quoted by Kemp 89).

The very title "Aubade" is used ironically. "Aubade" means a sun-rise song. The appearance of a new day which is supposed to suggest hope implies here a sign of the end of the journey of life. This is reminiscent of the poem "Sad Steps." Here the life-journey is faithfully recorded as night turns to dawn at four. The tone of this poem is direct and its language is plain,

aspects which suggest that the poet has arrived at a stage where he has no reason to be ostentatious. Like Yeats he seems to have realized that there is greater "enterprise in walking naked."

> I work all day, and get half drunk at night.
> Waking at four to soundless dark, I stare,
> In time the curtain-edges will grow light.
> Till then I see what's really always there:
> Unresting death, a whole day nearer now,
> Making all thought impossible but how,
> And where and whence I shall myself die.
>
> (208)

The idea of death as the only reality of life makes the speaker greatly confused. On getting up early in the morning he views the "soundless dark" and finds death in it. The use of question tags "how," "where," and "when" in quick succession indicates the intensity of his anguish. The thought of dying has assumed a larger dimension in him than a mere contemplation of death as he visualizes his own end. However, he does not have any regret for the opportunities lost or for the favours denied, but his heart sinks at the thought of

> . . . the total emptiness for ever,
> The sure extinction that we travel to
> And shall be lost in always. Not to be here,
> Not to be anywhere,
> And soon; nothing more terrible, nothing more true.
>
> (208)

Larkin thinks that the attempt to transcend death by religion, music and philosophy is useless. Though death is an abstract idea and cannot be seen, heard, touched, tasted and smelt it is omnipresent in its intricate symbolism. Religion and philosophy are incapable of providing any relief from the fear of death. He is also aware of the futility of any courageous stand against it. It makes no difference for a man whether he is courageous or a coward in the face of death. Death is somewhere near waiting its turn:

> . . . Courage is not good!
> It meant not scaring others. Being brave
> Lets no one off the grave.
> Death is no different whined at than withstood.
>
> (209)

The poem seems to be a nightmare of death which haunts Larkin. In the last stanza he is awakened. He returns from his dream to the world of familiarity. He tries to dispel the fear of death by work. This is perhaps the only way one could keep death away. In his article "Not the Place's Fault" he says, "As I get older, for instance, I grow increasingly impatient of holidays" (Chambers 48).

There are certain pertinent answers given by Larkin in his personal interviews which indicate his idea about death that occurred in his poetry. When asked, "Do you think much about getting older? he answered "Yes, dreadfully. If you assume you are going to live to be seventy, seven decades, and think of each

decade as a day of the week, starting with Sunday, then I am on Friday afternoon now. Rather a shock isn't it? If you ask why does it bother me, I can only say I dread endless extinction" (RW 55).

The exaltation of work as a way by which the fear of death could be dispelled is an affirmative point in Larkin's poetry. In fact, besides the poems which express Larkin's bleak view of life, there are poems which celebrate love, work, human relationship etc. These poems, which we will discuss in the next chapter, demonstrate that Larkin is not a pessimist or a nihilist.

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