Larkin's Light[*]

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Light gripped him. *In the Grip of Light* was the title of one of Philip Larkin's earliest poetry collections; he said it summed up for him 'the state of being alive'.[1] His life was dappled by light, despite his reputation for gloominess ('Lead, Kindly Light' was sung at his funeral).[2] He associated light with reading: Mansfield and Lawrence in the 'brilliant sun' on the lawns of St. John's College, Oxford;[3] Hardy in the new east-facing digs during his first job in Shropshire where the sun woke him 'inconveniently early'.[4] He was receptive to light patterns in other writers, praising Lawrence Durrell for his 'brightness, colour [and] sudden staggering clarity'[5] and visualising Auden's career as a 'fierce ten-year flare' followed by 'a sudden American extinction' and a 'protracted guttering twilight'.[6] In 1939, aged 17, he wrote a poem called '(A Study in Light and Dark)' (140).[7] It shows his alertness to different *kinds* of light: the 'glow' of the railway, the 'flash' of a shot, the 'twin headlights of a capitalist's car', the 'gaslight of a trodden worker', the light of a cinema, of the moon, of a match, of Mars. Photo-sensitivity would continue to characterise his work. His poetry, and his novels (not discussed here, but addressed in the preceding volume in the series), display an extraordinary spectrum of lighting

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[1] Letter to J. B. Sutton of 28 January 1948, *Philip Larkin: Selected Letters*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), p. 144. On the title, see further Stephen Regan, '*In the Grip of Light*: Philip Larkin's Poetry of the 1940s', *New Larkins for Old: Critical Essays*, ed. James Booth (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 121-9. Larkin sent *In the Grip of Light*, a collection of 24 poems, for consideration by publishers in 1947, but it was never published (see Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), pp. 172-4).

[2] Jean Hartley, *Philip Larkin's Hull and East Yorkshire* (Philip Larkin Society/University of Hull, 1995/2005), p. 33.

[3] Letter to J. B. Sutton of 23 June 1941, *Selected Letters*, pp. 14, 16, 18.

[4] Philip Larkin, *Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces 1955-1982* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983), p. 29.

[5] Philip Larkin, *Further Requirements: Interviews, Broadcasts, Statements and Book Reviews*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), p. 177.

[6] *Further Requirements*, p. 342.

[7] All references to Larkin's poetry are from Archie Burnett, ed., *Philip Larkin: The Complete Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2012). Dates of first publication and page numbers from the *Complete Poems* are given after the first citation of a poem's title in the text.

effects, from the Yeatsian frost shine and 'fire-spilling star' of Poem XXXI: 'The North Ship' in *The North Ship* (1945) (21-3) to the candid 'light, unanswerable and tall and wide' of 'Deceptions' (1955, 41) to the mournful lights 'com[ing] on at four' of 'Toads Revisited' (1962, 55-6) to the chiaroscuro of 'Livings' (1972, 77-9) to the ineffable 'lighted memory no miles eclipse' of 'Bridge for the Living (1981, 118-9). Here I look at how light illuminates two key, related ideas in Larkin's poetry of the 1960s and 1970s (which primarily means the pieces collected in *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964) and *High Windows* (1974)): the relationship between the physical universe and human existence, and asset management. I also consider the light(ness) of his work in the sense of clarity and transparency: ease of reading and lack of deception. Pausing on six poems from 1961 to 1977—four of which fall into natural pairs, two of which don't—I follow Larkin's light in its transitions from the full blaze of sunlight to cold, defining, silvery moonlight, from the artificial glow of gas fires and glare of electric bulbs in hotels, hospitals and old people's homes to the pale yellow, watery light of early evenings, from the luminousness seen at the edges of things to the grey, clarifying light of dawn.

Solar and Lunar

'Sad Steps' (1968, 89) and 'Solar' (1966, 89-90) face each other in *High Windows* (1974).[8] 'Solar' comes second but Larkin wrote it first.[9] I'll start with 'Solar', then, before considering the effect of reversing the order. Though Larkin described it as 'my little poem about the sun',[10] the word 'sun' does not actually appear in it. The adjectival title suggests that the subject is, not the sun itself, but its properties, what emanates from it.[11] Larkin had already exploited in his poetry the powerful effect of sunlight: in Poem VII (8) of *The North Ship* the

[8] Philip Larkin, *High Windows* (London: Faber and Faber, 1974), pp. 32-33.
[9] See note by Burnett in *Complete Poems*, pp. 466, 464.
[10] Note by Burnett in *Complete Poems*, p. 466.
[11] 'Solar' was written in 1964 (note by Burnett in *Complete Poems*, p. 466), about ten years before solar power or solar energy entered public consciousness.

'shining' morning turns the speaker's night worries into something 'frail and unsure', and the sun 'pac[ing] the sky' gives strength at the end of a relationship in Poem XXIV (18). Poem I of *The North Ship,* 'Fragment from May' (1938) and 'The Ships at Mylae' (1939) forge similar connections between sunshine, strength, joy and hopefulness. But in 'Spring' (1951, 40), the 'dangled looking-glass' in the sky serves rather more cruelly to illuminate the speaker pursuing his 'pursed-up way across the park'; in 'Ambulances' (1961, 63-4), 'Loud noons' bring thoughts of mortality; and in 'Love Songs in Age' (1964, 51),[12] the sun-like 'glare of that much-mentioned brilliance, love' serves only as a reminder of unfulfilled promises. Sunshine has a mixed reaction, then, in Larkin, as these instances show, and 'Solar' is no exception. The association it makes is between sunlight and wealth.

Wealth—of all kinds, and what to do with it—intrigued Larkin. Barbara Everett, one of his most perceptive readers, notes that 'somewhere within the past' of his poem 'Money' is the New Testament parable of the talents which 'speaks of human goodness in terms of saving and losing life, as if life were money'.[13] For Everett, the conclusion of 'Money' is that 'neither saving nor spending […] much recommends itself'.[14] Thoughts about life as an asset to be banked or spent also crop up in 'Dockery and Son' (1963, 65-7) ('Whether or not we use it, it goes') and in 'Aubade' (1977, 115-16) ('time / Torn off unused'). 'Solar' is also about expenditure: of power and energy, whether understood in terms of light, life, creativity, emotion or sex.

The poem is addressed to the sun, without mentioning it by name—no 'sun / Son' word-play here. Nor is it a familiar, irreverent apostrophe like Donne's 'The Sun Rising'. This sun is strangely alien, a surreal object in the sky.[15] The eye looks directly at it (apparently and

[12] Larkin began work on this poem in 1953 (note by Burnett in *Complete Poems*, pp. 397-8).
[13] Barbara Everett, 'Larkin's Money', *New Larkins for Old*, ed. Booth, 11-28: p. 14.
[14] Everett, 'Larkin's Money', p. 13.
[15] On Larkin and Surrealism, see Sam Perry, '"Only in Dreams": Philip Larkin and Surrealism', *English* 59.224 (Summer 2010), pp. 95-119.

disconcertingly without harm), perceiving it variously as 'lion face', 'Single stalkless flower', 'petalled head', 'hand'. A number of words with the prefix 'un-' build up a sense of this object's self-sufficiency: 'unfurnished', 'unaided', 'unrecompensed'. Past participles without agents—'Suspended', 'Coined'—create the impression that it has always been there (suspended by whom? coined by whom? when?). 'How still you stand' says the speaker: this sun is not seen to move across the sky. It is hermaphroditic, both 'Spilling' and a 'Single stalkless flower': sexually self-sufficient, that is. And so the associations accumulate: independence ('unaided'), selflessness ('unrecompensed'), plenitude ('spilling') and inexhaustibleness ('You give for ever').

What radiates from the poem is a sense of power or energy that is infinitely plentiful and wholly self-reliant. It is pure wealth (note the presence of the words 'Coined' and 'gold') and pure giving. As such, it contrasts with the humans it illuminates and warms, whose 'needs hourly / Climb and return'. The sun is motionless, that is, while human needs describe regular, self-serving parabolas, rising and falling (a bit like the stock market). If the solar effulgence gladdens with the thought that those 'needs' will be provided for, that note of self-sufficiency is a warning. The positive light effects are a projection of the eye of the beholder rather than the result of deliberate attention paid by the physical world to humankind.

Across the page in 'Sad Steps', the moonlight is clean, hard, bright, cold and focused. Larkin wishes it weren't. He uses sounds like 'ss', 'sh' and 'dge' to blur those sharp edges, introduces a disorderly note with 'a cavernous, a wind-picked sky' and with off-rhymes (piss / cleanliness, separate / art) and hints at the insubstantial and wraith-like with the clouds 'that blow / Loosely as cannon-smoke', an image that also turns the moon into another surreal object in the sky—a 'laughable', 'preposterous' cannon-ball. Its unforgiving light induces a 'shiver', of dismay as much as of cold. For:

The hardness and the brightness and the plain
Far-reaching singleness of that wide stare

Is a reminder of the strength and pain
Of being young; that it can't come again,
But is for others undiminished somewhere.

This is the kind of light that might be used in an operating-theatre—clinical, wide-angled, searching, unavoidable. It harshly illuminates a delicate truth. The opening line of the poem—'Groping back to bed after a piss'—is not only a deliberate piece of coarseness, an affront to the fine filigree of the sonnet to which its title alludes, Sir Philip Sidney's 'With how sad steps, O moon, thou climb'st the skies'. It also defines the speaker as a middle-aged or even older man who has to get up in the early hours of the morning to empty his weak bladder. (Larkin was 46 when he wrote it.) He may be groping his way back to bed, but by the light of that silvery moon the young are still hard at it. The knowledge hurts. But if its own finiteness is youth's 'pain', it is also youth's 'strength'. The implication is that being young should be made the most of. A financial advisor would call it asset optimization.

Like 'Solar', 'Sad Steps' uses natural light to make a point about resources. While one person's stock is losing value, another's is still buoyant. In this sense, 'Sad Steps' resonates with Sidney's poem. Larkin scoffed at attempts to connect the two, insisting 'My poem has nothing to do with love, or disdainful beauties, or anything like that.'[16] What it *does* have in common with Sidney's is the idea of unequal distribution. 'Do they above love to be loved, and yet / Those lovers scorn whom that love doth possess?' asks Sidney's sexually frustrated speaker Astrophil,[17] playing with the paradox of being simultaneously possessed by love and

[16] Note by Burnett in *Collected Poems*, pp. 464-5.
[17] Sir Philip Sidney, *Selected Poems*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973/1986), p. 132.

unable to possess the desired one. But when Astrophil looks at the 'wan' moon, he assumes that it, too, is love-sick and feels a sense of 'fellowship' with it.[18] Larkin's speaker derives no such consolation from a moon whose fullness highlights his own diminution.

Facing each other in *High Windows*, 'Sad Steps' and 'Solar' form a 24-hour reflection on human and natural assets. Reversing the order of composition creates a transition, if not from darkness to light, at least from the pallor of the moon to the blaze of the sun: an intensification rather than a sudden enlightenment. Youth, strength and vigour are finite, says the verso—steps will grow sadder and sadder with age. Human needs, whether fulfilled or not, are insubstantial ('like angels') but light and heat are limitless, says the recto (this is not a green poem). Moonlight is on a human scale; solar power is off that scale. But in neither case do natural resources have a direct connection with human affairs. Light shines regardless.

Artificial Light

If 'Sad Steps' and 'Solar' form a natural light-related pair in *High Windows,* another juxtaposition features artificial light: 'Friday Night in the Royal Station Hotel' (1967, 80-1) and 'The Old Fools' (1973, 81-2). This time, though, the pair is placed in chronological order of composition. The *éminence grise* behind Larkin's depictions of artificial light is John Betjeman. Larkin, who wrote a number of times on Betjeman's poetry, picked up and sympathised with his recreations of lost or vanishing styles and tastes.[19] He listed these as 'nineteenth-century ecclesiastical and domestic architecture […]; seaside bungalows, sports girls, the Church of England, verse novels, gas lighting, branch railways'[20] and, elsewhere, as

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[18] Sidney, *Selected Poems*, p. 132.

[19] On the difference between Betjeman's sentimentality and Larkin's nostalgia, see Edna Longley, 'Larkin, Decadence and the Lyric Poem', *New Larkins for Old*, ed. Booth, 29-50: p. 44.

[20] *Further Requirements*, p. 160.

'Comper interiors, clergyman's widows and gaslight'.[21] Note that he mentions gas-light both times. This is the quintessential Betjeman light effect: the 'Gleam of gas' of 'Myfanwy at Oxford' (1940); the 'gas-lit evensong' of 'St. Saviour's, Aberdeen Park, Highbury, London, N.' (1948); the 'Gas light on the platform' and 'on frosty evergreens' of 'Pershore Station, or a Liverish Journey First Class' (1958); 'the steam and the gas-light' of 'Monody on the Death of Aldersgate Street Station' (1958).[22] Betjeman's gas-light carries similar values to steam travel, the Book of Common Prayer and Oxford University. Larkin's gas-light—in his case, the light of the gas-fire—has a similar aura of tradition and nostalgia, but there are also connotations to it of loneliness, mediocrity, shabbiness and failure. This is the day's-end lighting of 'Vers de Société' (1971, 91) in which sitting by a gas fire under a lamp brings distressing thoughts of 'all the spare time that has flown / / Straight into nothingness'.

There is also something about the electric light—the 'lamp'—in 'Vers de Société' that is lowering, probably because it brings to mind 'Mr Bleaney' (1955, 50) and that most pathetic of lodgers' 'sixty-watt bulb', artificial illuminant of an ersatz existence. Betjeman finds a certain cosiness and comfort in electric light ('So when you see electric light / Behind pink curtains it's all right'), while also associating it with the distressingly and irredeemably modern ('All fields we'll turn to sports grounds, lit at night / From concrete standards by fluorescent light').[23] Larkin's electric light is, if anything, crueller. 'Essential Beauty' aligns 'radiant bars / (Gas or electric)' with the unrealistic, deceptive worlds portrayed in advertising posters. These 'shin[ing]' advertisements 'Reflect none of the rained-on streets and squares' over which they loom. Real life—'this world'—is dingier, dirtier, darker. And different, too, from the technicolour adverts is the 'dappled park' which 'dying smokers' are dimly aware of.

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[21] *Required Writing*, p. 208. Betjeman's friend, the Scottish-born architect Sir Ninian Comper (1864-1960), was known for his church interiors.
[22] Betjeman, *Collected Poems* (London: John Murray, 2006), pp. 71, 127, 224, 217.
[23] 'Camberley' and 'The Town Clerk's Views' (Betjeman, *Collected Poems*, pp. 10, 146).

Contrasting the glitter of consumer goods with the airy light of the ineffable (and here also with the grime of the 'slums'), Larkin registers the harshness, in all senses, of artificial light. He does so again in 'How' (1970, 112-13) and 'The Building' (1972, 84-6), poems in which hospitals are depicted as accumulations of electric light: 'lighted cliffs' in the one, a 'lucent comb' in the other.[24] So, in Larkin's mind, electric light becomes the bleached clinical light of hospitals, the light associated with the terrors of infirmity, aging and death.

With these associations in mind, I turn to the artificial light of 'Friday Night at the Royal Station Hotel' and 'The Old Fools'. Like 'Sad Steps' and 'Solar', 'Friday Night' thinks of light and humanity as separate concerns. The opening word of the sonnet is 'Light' but this promising beginning is immediately undermined by the information that it 'spreads darkly downwards from the high / Clusters of lights'. How does light 'spread darkly'? By casting shadows? There is more gloom to come. In 'shoeless corridors'—no guests to leave out shoes for cleaning, no one walking—'lights burn'. The verb is an old-fashioned one to use for electric light[25]—presumably the Royal Station Hotel had been electrified at the time the poem is set[26]—harking back to an earlier age of gas-lamps or even candle-light. 'Burn' reprises 'Sad Steps''s idea of a finite resource. These lights seem to consume energy rather than radiate it. And they do so in a place that humanity has abandoned. It is Friday night, typically a time for socializing, but all is deserted, empty, silent. Chairs are not sat in, doors are not closed, meals are not eaten, the evening paper is not sold. Humans have long since departed: the 'Full ashtrays' contain

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[24] 'The Building' was apparently inspired by Hull Royal Infirmary (see Motion, *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life*, pp. 419-20). This hospital presents a face of many windows, so that, with its lights on, it looks like an illuminated honeycomb. But it also has a structure on the roof not unlike a cock's-comb. It is not clear which kind of 'comb' Larkin had in mind.

[25] Cf Poem XXXII of *The North Ship* (pp. 23-4): 'rooms still burning their electric light'.

[26] Ironically, the hotel burned down in 1990 (note by Burnett in *Complete Poems*, p. 452).

literal burnings-out that are the only signs of salesmen who have long since ‘gone back to Leeds’. The burning bulbs are pure wastefulness.

For the speaker, they illuminate the realisation that there may be no such place as home. The headed hotel notepaper, ‘made for writing home / (If home existed)’, is good only for writing ‘letters of exile’. Exile: a light burning (out) uselessly in an empty corridor (‘with no one to see’,[27] it is tempting to add). ‘*Night comes on*’ with the accompanying thought that ‘*Waves fold behind villages*’ (original italics): not light-waves but the waves of the North Sea off the Yorkshire coast, black in the night-time. Yet, in this bleak and isolated place, it is the electric lights rather than the on-coming night that are the true portents of darkness.

Across the page in ‘The Old Fools’, Larkin imagines that old age is like having the Royal Station Hotel on a Friday night inside your own head, all the time.[28] ‘Perhaps being old is having lighted rooms / Inside your head’, he speculates. There may be people inside these rooms—‘Setting down a lamp, smiling from a stair’—but it might just be ‘the rooms themselves’, with ‘chairs and a fire burning’. The *mise-en-scène* is the same as in the hotel: lights on, humans absent, energy needlessly consumed. But outside, the light is different:

> The blown bush at the window, or the sun’s
> Faint friendliness on the wall some lonely
> Rain-ceased midsummer evening.

This frail, waning light recalls Betjeman’s ‘North Coast Recollections’ (1948) (‘this after-storm-lit evening’).[29] Larkin’s evocation uses Betjemanesque pastels but they occur in a poem which confronts unflinchingly the monochrome terrors of old age and death: a gentle moment

[27] ‘The Old Fools’.
[28] Cf. ‘Age’ (1954, 37): ‘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’.
[29] Betjeman, *Collected Poems*, p. 139. Larkin quotes this in *Further Requirements* (p. 162).

among much that is unbearable. Notably, the ‘old fools’ who drool and piss themselves sit ‘through days of thin continuous dreaming / Watching light move’. Watching light seems a peculiarly detached occupation: not using light or profiting from it but simply observing it. It’s the parable of the talents again, used to indict the elderly. And moving light—which must be natural light—marks the ineluctable passage of time. It is what this light signifies that is aging these people, the passing of the hours and days that produces their ‘Ash hair, toad hands, prune face dried into lines’. They’re not ignoring it; they’re watching it. Helplessly.

Lights on in an empty room. The lighting effects in ‘Friday Night’ and ‘The Old Fools’ don’t just create a dismal atmosphere—that melancholy, tea-time-ish feeling when the daylight is so weak the lights have to be turned on—but reiterate the light-associated ideas of ‘Sad Steps’ and ‘Solar’. Burning lights are a reminder both that resources are finite and that careful conservation can’t prevent their ultimate extinction. So much is evident in the patterns of light crossing the floor.

Clarity

Elsewhere, Larkin watches a different kind of light: stiller, airier, more luminous. This is the light refracted through the ‘sun-comprehending glass’ of ‘High Windows’, which Larkin described as his ‘ultimate symbol of freedom from […] restrictions’.[30] It is the illumination of a space or place that is holy without being religious; critics have called it an ‘idealizing element’.[31] Seamus Heaney thought it a vision of ‘the spiritual Platonic old England’.[32] More literally, it is Hull light, the light of the city Larkin lived in from 1955 until his death in 1985. Hull might more commonly be associated with the ‘endless clouds of smoke’ and ‘thick and

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[30] Quoted in Motion, *Philip Larkin: A Writer’s Life*, p. 371.
[31] James Booth, ‘Introduction’, *New Larkins for Old*, ed. Booth, 1-10: p. 2.
[32] Heaney borrows the phrase from Geoffrey Hill, who borrowed it from Coleridge (Heaney, ‘The Main of Light’, p. 151).

ubiquitous fogs' that Jean Hartley remembers in her memoir of Larkin,[33] but its eastwards-facing location on the Humber estuary means that it is often awash with luminous coastal light. Larkin described the effect in his preface to *A Rumoured City: New Poets from Hull* (1982):

> [A] city that is in the world, yet sufficiently on the edge of it to have a different resonance. Beyond Hull is the plain of Holderness, lonelier and lonelier, and after that the birds and lights of Spurn Head, and then the sea. One can go ten years without seeing these things, yet they are always there, giving Hull the air of having its face half-turned towards the distance and silence, and what lies beyond them.[34]

'Here' (1961, 49), the opening poem of *The Whitsun Weddings*, plots a journey, or a 'swerve', east into this kind of space, silence and light. But before reaching it, different kinds of light must be passed through. The traveller, speaking without self-reference, emerges from 'rich industrial shadows'—a description that adds quality and quantity to the darkness, evoking ease and sumptuousness as well as monetary value (one is reminded of the capitalist's headlights in '(A Study in Light and Dark)' and the gold and coinage of 'Solar')[35]—and senses rather than sees 'workmen at dawn', the undiscovered labourers behind industry's profit. The landscape becomes increasingly rural and, alongside the river, the traveller observes 'piled gold clouds' and 'shining gull-marked mud'. The piles of gold and their cloudiness, the underlying murkiness of what shines, the implication of duplicity in 'gull-marked':[36] all these are discreet pointers to the negative aspects of wealth creation—the problem that the value of investments may go down as well as up and the potential for corruption.[37] In the two middle stanzas of the

[33] Hartley, *Philip Larkin's Hull and East Yorkshire*, p. 7.
[34] *Further Requirements*, p. 136. Quoted with the permission of The Society of Authors as the Literary Representative of the Estate of Philip Larkin.
[35] Stephen Cooper makes the same connection with 'Solar' (*Philip Larkin: Subversive Writer* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2004), p. 158).
[36] To gull means 'to dupe, cheat, befool, take in, deceive' ('Gull, v.3', *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, March 2016), accessed 5 May 2017).
[37] The 'shining gull-marked mud' also nods to the 'shining fields of mud' in Betjeman's 'Youth and Age on Beaulieu River, Hants' (1945) (Betjeman, *Collected Poems*, p. 111).

poem, the discreet hints become explicit. Here is consumer capitalism at full throttle as 'residents from raw estates' are 'brought down / The dead straight miles' (a contrast with the subtler swerving course of the traveller) on shopping expeditions in the city. These 'cut-price' crowds are after bargains: another reminder of volatile monetary value. The light conditions are not explicitly mentioned but the 'Cheap suits, red kitchen-ware, sharp shoes, iced lollies, / Electric mixers, toasters, washers, driers' have high visibility through the 'plate-glass swing-doors'.

The list is worth pausing on. Similar catalogues recur in Larkin's poetry: in 'The Whitsun Weddings' ('the perms, / The nylon gloves and jewellery-substitutes, / The lemons, mauves, and olive-ochres') and in 'To the Sea' (1970, 75) ('the cheap cigars, / The chocolate-papers, tea-leaves, and, between / / The rocks, the rusting soup-tins', for example.[38] Larkin praised Louis MacNeice for writing in the same vein and so producing 'the poetry of our everyday life, of shop-windows, traffic policemen, ice-cream soda, lawn-mowers'.[39] This line of thinking has affinities with Wordsworth's ideas about poetry in the 1802 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*—the famous aim of 'fitting to metrical arrangement a selection of the real language of men'.[40] Larkin compared himself to Wordsworth on several occasions, most memorably in the remark that 'Deprivation is to me what daffodils were to Wordsworth'[41]—a comment that,

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[38] Substituting Hull for Cornwall, 'To the Sea' is markedly similar to Betjeman's 'Delectable Duchy' (1974), in which the sea's 'surf-line' is clogged with 'Senior Service carton(s)', 'wrappings of potato crisps' and 'broken plastic toys' (Betjeman, *Collected Poems*, p. 306). See also 'The Town Clerk's Views', which aligns floodlights, 'green electric lights' and 'fluorescent light' with 'Cod and two veg., free pepper, salt and mustard, / Followed by nice hard plums and lumpy custard' (Betjeman, *Collected Poems*, pp. 145, 146).

[39] *Further Requirements*, p. 18. Motion notes that Larkin's poetic 'pantheon' was filled with 'plain-speaking poets': 'Hardy, Edward Thomas, Betjeman (and later Stevie Smith and Gavin Ewart)' (*Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life*, p. 344).

[40] William Wordsworth, *Preface to* Lyrical Ballads, with Pastoral and Other Poems *(1802)*, *William Wordsworth*, ed. Stephen Gill (The Oxford Authors) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 595-615: p. 595. 'Here domes and statues, spires and cranes cluster', from 'Here', echoes Wordsworth's sonnet 'Composed Upon Westminster Bridge' with its 'Ships, towers, domes, theatres and temples' (*William Wordsworth*, ed. Gill, p. 285). Archie Burnett makes the connection between the two poems (*Complete Poems*, p. 393).

[41] *Required Writing*, p. 47. See also *Further Requirements*, pp. 31, 51. It must be acknowledged that, in a letter to Anthony Thwaite of 13 January 1970, Larkin described 'To the Sea' as 'rather Wordsworthian, in the sense of being bloody dull' (*Selected Letters*, p. 425).

when paused on, suggests that bleakness and mundanity must have had, in his view, a revelatory quality. The revelation was not anything transcendent but rather that poetic value lay in clarity, or lightness. In this vein, Larkin also praised Stevie Smith's light verse or, more specifically, her lightness of touch—'like a hand swept across strings', as in 'The Old Sweet Dove of Wiveton' ('Put out that Light, / Put out that bright Light') which had, nonetheless, 'the authority of sadness'.[42] It is these sorts of remarks that have led critics to focus on the apparent easiness of reading Larkin's poetry—the 'Zen diaphanousness' of his writing, in Clive James's lambent words[43]—and, as if as a corollary, his antipathy to modernist obscurantism.[44] The Larkin-as-anti-modernist argument is attackable from more than one angle—Larkin appreciated and profited from modernist writing; modernist writing is not all obscure—but the most relevant point here is that even when he is being lucid, Larkin is not always wholly clear. Or, as Barbara Everett unimprovably put it, referring to 'Sympathy in White Major', he is 'clear as ice and gin and tonic are clear, clear as whiteness is blank'.[45] Take, for example, the lines already quoted from 'Here': 'Cheap suits, red kitchen-ware, sharp shoes, iced lollies, / Electric mixers, toasters, washers, driers'. In the second line, the trochaic white goods pile up as quickly as anyone could snatch them from a sales display. But *iced lollies*? Why 'iced lollies' in a list of consumer durables and two items of clothing? Would you attempt to carry them home, presumably keeping them well away from the suits in case they dripped, or would you try to eat them on the spot in the middle of the store? Is Larkin restating his thoughts about consumption versus expenditure, or did he simply not go shopping much? A minor detail it may be but it's also another tiny piece of evidence of what Edna Longley calls the poet's

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[42] *Required Writing*, pp. 155-6, 158.

[43] Clive James, 'Philip Larkin: Smaller and Clearer' (1975), http://www.clivejames.com/books/pillars/larkinsmaller, accessed 5 May 2017.

[44] John Osborne cites both Blake Morrison (*The Movement: English Poetry and Fiction of the 1950s* (London: Methuen, 1980), pp. 193, 274) and Ian Gregson (*Contemporary Poetry and Postmodernism* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), pp. 211, 213) as calling Larkin 'anti-modernist' ('Postmodernism and Postcolonialism in the Poetry of Philip Larkin, *New Larkins for Old*, ed. Booth, 144-65: p. 147).

[45] Barbara Everett, 'Philip Larkin: After Symbolism', *Essays in Criticism* 30.3 (July 1980), 227-42: p. 230.

‘distance from what he saw as “ordinary” experience’.[46] (‘Lollies’ is of a kind with ‘clobber’, ‘kiddies’ and ‘nippers’, words that Larkin elsewhere uses to evoke an undesirable bourgeois life-style.)[47] And it reminds us that Larkin’s lightness, in the sense of the apparent accessibility of his writing—‘My mind is so shallow that I can only respond to poems, written in total explicit style’, he told Douglas Dunn implausibly, from All Souls’ College, Oxford[48]—can be more assumed than actual.

‘Here’ has one more lighting effect. At the end of the third stanza and in the fourth there comes what Larkin expressly terms a clarification:

> And out beyond its mortgaged half-built edges
> Fast-shadowed wheat-fields, running high as hedges,
> Isolate villages, where removed lives
>
> Loneliness clarifies. […]
> Luminously-peopled air ascends;
> And past the poppies bluish neutral distance
> Ends the land suddenly beyond a beach
> Of shapes and shingle. Here is unfenced existence:
> Facing the sun, untalkative, out of reach.

According to the syntax, it is the ‘removed lives’ that loneliness clarifies. But the stanza-break makes it possible casually to read ‘clarifies’ as intransitive. Loneliness intensifies, becomes purer.[49] It also clarifies transitively in the sense of making things simpler. The poem has reached a space of solitude, silence and thing-less-ness, whose light conditions are luminous.

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[46] Edna Longley, ‘Larkin, Decadence and the Lyric Poem’, p. 43.
[47] See ‘Self’s the Man’ (1964, 58-9).
[48] Philip Larkin, Letter of 16 January 1971, *Selected Letters*, p. 435.
[49] To clarify in its technical sense means ‘to free from all impurities’ (‘Clarify, v.’, 3b, *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, March 2016), accessed 5 May 2017).

This space is possible to perceive but not to attain ('out of reach'): despite the poem's title, it is not 'here' but inevitably elsewhere (and Larkin called elsewhere 'important' ('The Importance of Elsewhere' (1955, 64)). It clearly contrasts with the bargain-hunting scenes back in the city—not least in that it seems to be of lasting value—though its precise significance is left unspecified.

But another example of Everett's white-blank clarity calls the entire luminous, sacred-seeming space into question. How should the following clause be parsed? 'And past the poppies bluish neutral distance / Ends the land suddenly beyond a beach / Of shapes and shingle.' Should there be a possessive apostrophe after 'poppies'—'the poppies' bluish neutral distance'? This would yield the most natural reading. Without one, 'past the poppies' becomes the whole adverbial phrase and 'bluish neutral distance' the subject of 'ends' with 'the land' as its direct object (past the poppies, it is the bluish neutral distance that puts an end to the land suddenly). This is more than grammatical pedantry: ambiguity means that in the space where everything seemed to clarify, there is haze.

Yet clarity—in the sense of being less deceived—mattered intensely to Larkin. In 'Aubade' (1977, 115-16) the gathering light is white-grey, chalky, Hardy-esque; the light of Flintcomb-Ash where the fields are 'a desolate drab' and the sky 'a white vacuity of countenance with the lineaments gone'.[50] In the novel from which these quotations are taken, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Hardy, a writer acutely aware of gradations of light, distinguishes between dawn twilight and dusk twilight:

> The grey half-tones of daybreak are not the grey half-tones of day's close, though the degree of their shade may be the same. In the twilight of the morning, light seems

[50] Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* [1891], ed. Juliet Grindle and Simon Gatrell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983/2008), p. 304.

> active, darkness passive; in the twilight of the evening it is the darkness which is active and crescent, and the light which is the drowsy reverse.[51]

Like 'Sad Steps', 'Aubade' begins at 4 a.m. But there is no moonlight. Instead, the speaker waits in 'soundless dark' as the phenomenon that Hardy describes happens: 'Slowly light strengthens'. This is 'active' light (the 'drowsy' light that Hardy mentions is the failing light of 'The Old Fools') and, like the moonlight of 'Sad Steps', it is both inescapable and careless of human desires and fears.

In fact, before light dawns outside the window—there are curtains to shut it out but it will nonetheless make its presence felt along their edges—clarity has been increasing in the speaker's mind. 'In time' those curtain-edges will grow, menacingly, light but even without that prompt the speaker sees 'what's really always there'. Death, '[u]nresting', takes no notice of light conditions, but dread of it is still a photic experience: a 'flash'. 'The mind blanks at the glare', Larkin writes, and readers may take a second look to check: yes, 'blanks', not 'blinks'. Instead of pulling down its shutters (but even they, like the curtains, might let in light), the mind whitens. Blanking is a curious idea: given the highly eloquent stanzas that ensue, this seems to be a mind teeming with thoughts, and a later image—'And so it stands just on the edge of vision, / A small unfocused blur, a standing chill'—suggests more of a willed, self-defensive mentality rather than a blank stare. In any event, the actual light conditions begin to catch up with the speaker's inner state:

> Slowly light strengthens, and the room takes shape.
>
> It stands plain as a wardrobe, what we know,
>
> Have always known, know that we can't escape,

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[51] Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, 145. Note the resemblance of 'Aubade' to Hardy's 'Four in the Morning' (1925): 'At four this day of June I rise: / The dawn-light strengthens steadily' (Samuel Hynes, ed. *Thomas Hardy* (The Oxford Authors) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 355). Archie Burnett points out the similarity in *Complete Poems*, 499.

Yet can't accept.

Wardrobes, being solid, domestic and commodious, are not as terrifying as 'sure extinction' but nonetheless loom large and are unmistakable. The homeliness of the image hardly mitigates the desperation. And, as the world wakes up, Larkin provides in a line the conditions that illuminate his renewed, horrified knowledge: 'The sky is white as clay, with no sun.' White, clayey, sunless: these are the light conditions of being undeceived, whether by religion or reason.

In such light, eyes need not narrow. The speaker's thoughts have clarified, along with the room, but the flash and glare, and the need to blink or blank, are over. Though Larkin later said that the ending was positive,[52] 'Aubade' seems to finish in a state of numbness. 'Clay' is something to be buried in. The reference to the 'uncaring […] world' not only injects the idea that people don't care for or about each other but also reiterates the point that the physical world doesn't care about the speaker's concerns.

Conclusion: photo-poetics

Larkin is anything but 'lite'. To borrow the adjective John Osborne used to describe him, his poetical complexity and intertextuality are truly 'Himalayan'.[53] The range of allusions within single poems can be astonishing, and Larkin also varies rhyme-schemes, metrical schemes and poetic genres across his work. As a result, his collections, as well as his individual poems, contain strands of this style, series of tiny references to that poet, discreet repeated use of this rhetorical device, minute tonal inflections from that poetic school. Any-angled, indeed.

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[52] Larkin explained: '"It isn't postmen, comma, like doctors, comma, but just postmen like doctors." I meant the arrival of the postman in the morning is consoling, healing' (A. N. Wilson, 'Honouring the Hermit of Hull', *The Times* (16 February 1984), p. 10, quoted by Burnett in *Complete Poems*, p. 499). But the doctor-like postmen add an ominous note, suggesting a quantity either of sick people to be treated or of dead bodies to be certified.

[53] Osborne, 'Postmodernism and Postcolonialism', p. 147.

But his poetry is lit. I have not described all, or even most, of the lighting effects of this highly photo-sensitive writer. Those I have concentrated on—sunlight and moonlight, artificial light, luminosity and dawn—have two thematic points in common. The first is that they show light, whether natural or man-made, to be oblivious to human wishes. Do not make the mistake of thinking that the sun is shining for you. It's just shining. The second is that they are reminders of the limited nature of human resources, in terms both of quantity and duration. Time is running out. Careful husbandry won't make much difference, alas.

The light examined here changes subtly, performing various kinds of poetic work within and across individual pieces. In 'Solar', the sunlight models plenitude and self-sufficiency, shows up by contrast humankind's finite resources and corroborates the thought that the physical universe only coincidentally fulfills human needs. The moonlight of 'Sad Steps' exemplifies full vigour and reminds the speaker of his own comparative decrepitude. In 'Friday Night', the burning lights make a similar point about the consumption of finite resources but, in addition and more subtly, they seem both to contrast with the speaker's darkening thoughts about solitude and exile and to reflect them. The mental 'lighted rooms' in 'The Old Fools' figure the state of solitude and exile that is old age and 'watching the light move' describes helplessness in the face of passing time. But the 'sun's / Faint friendliness […] some lonely / Rain-ceased midsummer evening' is a gentler reminder of past happiness, even if the faintness keeps failing powers in mind. In 'Here', the luminosity contrasts with materialism, not so much denoting a specific alternative to it as evoking and expressing a mood. And in 'Aubade', growing light figures a dawning realisation, as well as the blank extinction of death itself. Light can and does act metaphorically, that is, but it also affects tone, atmosphere and theme in the same way that theatrical lighting affects a scene on stage. Accordingly, a distinct photo-poetics suggests itself: tracking light and its transitions like

rhyme or metre to discover a poem's contradictions, emphases and concealments. For such a critical project, Larkin lights the way.