

## Belinda Cooke

Peter Robinson: *Poetry and Translation: the Art of the Impossible* (Liverpool Univ. Press), 2010, ISBN 9781846312182, £65, hb, 196 pp.

All too often translation debates get stuck in polarised views on the free versus the literal. It is thus very refreshing to encounter Peter Robinson's subtle, complex and above all optimistic take on what is going on when a poet attempts to translate a poem. Drawing our attention to the silver lining in the great translation cloud – the unique opportunity to engage with, 'the art of the impossible' – he removes himself from the likes of Robert Frost with his 'closed book' view that 'poetry is what gets left out in translation' to argue that translation is one more means whereby the poet can explore the nuances of language and thus far from being an unfortunate necessity is rather a cause for celebration.

His opening chapter provides the immediate trump card of Keats' 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer' – a poem which, no matter how frequently it is anthologised, still re-invokes Keats' first wondrous encounter with Homer in translation. Clearly our culture would have been at least one important poem poorer had Keats studied Greek. For Robinson, in the face of loss, there is as much to gain by engaging with the greats in such a way:

This craft-based art allows the poet-reader to envisage emulation within the dynamics of the impossible and awe-inspiring original through a plausibly achieved rendering of it.

(p. 5)

Rather than a simplistic debate over whether one can or can't translate, he offers a more productive discussion on how engaging with translation's impossibility can add further dimensions to the poet's own language and craft. Poets can thus work together to provide an open-ended solution to the translation dilemma – access to the likes of Mandelstam, Cavafy, Rilke, Pessoa or Neruda can be achieved via various 'plausibly achieved rendering[s]' of the original poem. This infinitely sensible view is one that he attributes to Elizabeth Bishop in her review of William Jay Smith's Laforgue poems: 'each poem needs several translations' (p. 46) and for Robinson it is the nub of his book's argument.

In chapter two Robinson argues strongly against translation that works at the extreme ends of the literal/free scale. He notes the terms some writers will use to justify tenuous connections between the original and the translation such as 'adaptation', 'version', 'imitation', and even 'after' and sees Don Paterson as a key representative of this tendency. Clearly, in his view impossibility should not be an excuse for total freedom. Though to suggest one can be totally literal is no more logical. A good deal of this chapter is then taken up with the two most famous proponents of these opposed viewpoints and in his comments on them Robinson gets to the heart of why he believes they are wrong:

I abandon the groundless freedoms of Lowell and the literalist debilitations of Nabokov, not only because both methods fail to deliver useful translations, but because both are partly implicitly and partly explicitly founded on false understandings of poets' and translators' relations to their language.

(p. 46)

For Robinson, both these extremes are missing out on engaging intelligently in this difficult 'art of the impossible' to the benefit of one's own poetry: to believe one can be literal shows little understanding for the subtleties of language and to be too free shows little respect for how the language of the original can contribute to your own. Robinson subsequently goes on to illustrate the complex, shared, pleasure to be had if one sees oneself as a part of that community of writers contributing to various careful renderings of loved poets: 'Many poets acknowledge that constraints can be the forcing house of creation' provided we don't try to make a quick getaway 'under the covers of those tacit allies, literal impossibility and poetic licence.' (p. 60)

What is so engaging about Robinson's text is the quiet passion with which he argues respect for all that is involved in the translation process: the original poem and its home culture along with the poetic self – 'finding what the poem can say for you in the process of working on it'. Always with Robinson it is not just what he says but the beautifully crafted phrasing he uses to construct his argument:

You can only be faithful to someone or some thing when you have acknowledged both its integrity and the need for that to be cherished and protected. You can only make an accurate measurement or accurate picture of something if the means of measuring or picturing are evidently not the same as the object being measured or pictured. Fidelity and accuracy are matched to the acceptance of difference, while literal translation invites us to fantasise that such qualities can be dispensed with because we are aiming to achieve an exact reproduction.

(pp. 42-43)

His view that 'Fidelity and accuracy are matched to the acceptance of difference' points to the originality of Robinson's theory of translation, even if its roots lie in earlier translation theorists, and it is entirely consistent with ideas he has expressed in his poetry, criticism, aphorisms and interviews. For example, although he builds on George Steiner's argument in *After Babel* that, 'All communication interprets between privacies' (OUP, 1975, p. 98) in Chapter 4, 'The Art of the Impossible' to explore the idea that every utterance is individual, it is the way he gains further inspiration from his favourite philosophers – Ludwig Wittgenstein, Bernard Williams, Richard Wollheim and Donald Davidson – in the process combined with the subtlety of his own arguments (presumably nurtured by his interest in them), that takes him beyond an amateur philosophical interest into a form of philosophical writing of his

own enabling him to place a highly individual slant on his theories about translation.

And it is this philosophical interest that dominates large sections of the later chapters to elaborate on the difficulties of proving the co-existence of sameness and difference. For this he uses his text to continue the very public 'one world' debate between himself and the academic and critic Eric Griffiths. Their differences need not greatly concern the reader of this text, what is important though is its importance to Robinson's take on the role of translation: all our words are our own and the translator should attempt, while accepting the impossibility of replicating those exactly, at the same time to acknowledge that there are common understandings which we can accept between cultures that should underpin our broader aims in translating poetry, whether it be that of the living or the dead. Seen in this light translation takes on a political role working towards cultural understanding and all that this implies:

Without such a common place, this one world I have been defending, there can be no recognised human rights, no international law, no war crimes tribunals with legitimacy beyond 'might is right'.

(p. 128)

As with everything Robinson writes this is a beautifully crafted piece of work which, as much as his poetry, provides scope for repeated reading. It is a deeply personal book drawing on his literary, critical and philosophical passions sustained over a long academic and writing career. Robinson offers us what he himself enjoys when reading particular philosophers – 'conversations with interesting friends': his ideas need our concentration, his choices for analysis often unexpected, but all is conveyed with a sincerity and directness and, dare one say it, a moral urgency that draws us in.

Harry Guest

PAST TIMES AND OTHER PLACES

A Tribute to Richard Burns on his 65<sup>th</sup> Birthday

London, 1972)	<i>Avebury</i> (Anvil Press Poetry,
Poetry, 1968)	<i>Time of a Flower</i> (Anvil Press
2006)	<i>The Blue Butterfly</i> (Salt, Cambridge,

Richard Burns wrote *Avebury* at Great Shelford in 1971 and dedicated it to Octavio Paz. The poem, which is composed in 24 short sections, appeared from Anvil in the following year with, as a cover, William Stukeley's engraving of 'A peice of the great circle'. This shows a huge, squat, contorted sarsen block in the foreground next to a fanciful tree. Other monoliths can be glimpsed in the background as well as two lines of wattled fencing which help to domesticate the eighteenth-century vision.

Although the poem starts and concludes with the Great Ring in Wiltshire and the stones themselves repeat the enigmatic claim 'I do not talk I say', the reader is led 'under the compact slogans of the sky' to visit different prehistoric sites, to explore deep caves 'past cataracts of stalactite' and to contemplate shattered statues by the waters of the Aegean – like the one of 'Nike...headless in the wind'. Burns is reminded at one stage of the famous Willendorf woman and catches wonderfully the grotesquely effective shape of the limestone figurine as a fertility symbol:

the whole blind body  
bowed over the womb  
as if above  
an unseen child

The poem is a wayward mosaic of brief statements in dreamlike contexts as if the poet is noting down brisk revelations flashed intermittently against the bone-wall of his skull – random yet telling snippets of information that do not need to 'cohere' – even while they are lighting up the quest for understanding. *Avebury* is an immensely *readable* poem. Each section persuades the eye to follow the mind-journey and piece together all the items from the past. We are encouraged to share them and, as we pursue his thought, they seem somehow to turn into our own private memories. Indeed, one of the messages from the Avebury stones is

*now any  
place is now*

and this gnomic epigram persuades Burns to deal delicately with the mysteries of universal consciousness. Everywhere, in this poem, is a centre. Images ramify outwards from each utterance like rings from a pebble



**‘imaginative reconstruction’ of the Neolithic and a wry regret for the carefree hours of his early youth.**

**There is a healthy concreteness about Burns’s writing:**

**the sun’s hammer  
the frost’s nails  
the wind’s arsenals**

**The language used in *Avebury* is hard, terse, definite – even when pondering abstracts like philosophy or the meaning of time. It is a poem to re-read and relish.**

**Three years earlier, Richard Burns translated a short selection of lyrics by the Venetian poet Aldo Vianello drawn from two collections published in Padua: *Timide Passioni* (1964) and *Cuore e Abisso* (1966). Venice, ‘the most beloved city’, is seen ‘in the glitter of rocking water’. This evocation of that unique city is well matched by Alan Spain’s haunting black-and-white cover for the 1968 Anvil publication entitled *Time of a Flower* which shows wavering trees the wrong way up and the watery hint of a sun.**

**Vianello, born in 1937, sees human life as transitory as a flower’s: ‘nothing / is left but to count up the years / and hear out their pitiful silence’.**

**However, he can celebrate his father ‘barefoot under sun and moon’ who remains ‘upright over the hard strokes of rowing’ and his mother in ‘her old black dress, grimy / from blowing into the fire’. The poet would know peace ‘as long as her head / covered my own / with whitened hair’. There are also nightmares in this collection, recalling the ‘abyss’ in the 1966 title:**

**among the hapless people  
in a damp corroded room**

**and he expects to be present at his own damnation. His days ‘fall short of hope’. In a Hall of Mirrors he sees**

**heads cut off from the neck  
of angels.**

**There are shadowy hints of love (those ‘timid passions’ perhaps} even though the ‘young woman in the flowered dress / has sleep in her blue eyes’ and her ‘gaze is lost in high trees’. The first verse of a poem entitled *When She Comes To My Mind* conveys so quietly the experience of loss by mixing the sense-language because what was seen resounds:**

**I search for you still  
but you come like the echo  
to spent light**

**The reader is made aware of the sights, sounds and smells of Venice – gondolas, strident choirs, seaweed. Each of these short lyrics is beautifully complete, reminding one sometimes of Eluard in their use of strikingly oblique imagery as when he writes ‘my heart pierced by a whirlpool’. Burns’s English versions capture their surface delicacy without losing the resonance of their Italian lyricism.**

In the spring of 1985 Burns was impelled to begin writing *The Blue Butterfly* when he visited the town of Kragujevac in what was then Yugoslavia. The vivid cover of the Salt edition displays a blurred, greatly enlarged photograph of a Common Blue on a reddish background. A frontispiece in black and white shows the poet's hand with a tiny butterfly on one finger. This photo was taken while he was visiting a museum built to commemorate three October days in 1942 when the Nazi occupying forces massacred over 2,000 civilian hostages ranging from an eleven-year-old child to a man of 78. In the background of the snapshot is a glass case which contains Hitler's command to his invading army: 'Machen Sie mir dieses Land deutsch' ('Make this country German for me'). This chilling juxtaposition of frail natural beauty and a madman's scream of aggrandizement formed the disturbing motive for this remarkably powerful book.

The very first poem tells us that, when this appalling carnage took place, 'Skies slept, or looked / the other way'. Over the page we read the 'standing orders' issued in 1941: 'If any German soldier is killed 100 hostages are to be executed.' After the event, a report on the 'reprisal measures' states the actual number of hostages who were shot. Turning the page we see the last messages scribbled by some of the victims, a young student, a book-keeper – and a schoolmaster who offered to take the place of his pupils destined to be executed. When this was refused he was killed along with them.

On the next page Burns proudly proclaims his Jewish heritage. However, those slain in the massacre were not all Jews and this book sets out particularly to grieve over 'man's inhumanity to man' irrespective of race, creed or colour.

Each of the seven sections contains seven poems – the mystic number. Burns is concerned to sanctify this carefully organised collection, to make it a holy memorial. As an accomplished linguist, he is intrigued to discover that 'nada' means 'nothing' in Spanish but 'hope' in Serbo-Croat. The poems confront this paradox with courage as Burns tries to salvage if not a recipe for hope at least some grounds for avoiding despair. He makes three 'attempts at telling' what the experience has meant to him, using truncated rhyme-royal deftly controlled. His method lends dignity to his focus, removing it light-years from mere sensationalism:

Nobody could stay unmoved in this place,  
not blench at all, not blench with at least some  
tightening of skin, muscles of throat and face  
or watering of eyes. *We who live on  
might have been them.*

He warns us 'Numb silence, though, is no answer to evil' but then goes on to wonder 'Is it *language itself* won't do here?' appearing to lose faith in 'the slickened varnish of rhyme'. The next section, *The Death of Children*, which focuses on our bewildered human inability to understand why and how the young can be allowed to die, is nevertheless composed of seven villanelles beautifully conceived and carried out. Here again, the cry of enraged desolation is made more effective by being reined in by the strict

demands of prosody. No inchoate howl here but deeply thought-out meditation:

It is the death of children most offends...  
Death can't deserve to reap such dividends  
from these, who scarcely lived, their parents say.  
What justice is, nobody comprehends.

Section 3 offers *Wreaths*, each one a perfect sonnet. Burns can rhyme 'angel' with 'change all' and 'revenge'll' and imagine 'that timeless time / when earth harvests redemption', when the flowers laid on these anonymous graves will metamorphose into 'imagos of butterflies, blue heralds'.

Verses in various forms making up the fourth section called *Songs of the Dead* permit the victims to protest:

Survivors, go ask Presidents  
Does this sacrifice make sense?

A schoolboy, fallen among the other corpses, thinks he sees 'a solitary gull sailing, a white sky-speck'

Then a new recruit fell on me. Total eclipse.  
Life poured out of me like rain from a thick cloud.

In this grim post-mortem world there are 'mazes unthreaded by cockcrow'. It is 'a place, not a place' where  
time is a catacomb, a grove of bones, a permanence,  
a station and a destiny, but not a destination.

In Section 5 we hear the 'statements of survivors'. One gives six verses. The first concludes that the untested cannot understand, having 'never been / pushed beyond the borders of the *possible*'. In verse 2 we have to accept that, behind this reticence, 'lie sentences so deep they are *unsayable*'. In the third verse 'honours and praises' are useless, making the survivors '*uncomfortable*'. In verse 4, when asked to explain their feelings, they are prevented by

a silence behind the silence behind their silence  
assuring us they know we are *corruptible*.

In verse 5 'questions that lie deepest are *unanswerable*' and, in the final verse, because they were 'chosen', 'because they have survived the *unimaginable*', they are 'as if twice born' and 'move among us, quietly. *Untouchable*'. This hushed and factual poem embodies the sense of guilt which must go on haunting those who have been permitted – for no obvious reason – to live beyond such horror. In the same way, Japanese combatants after the Second World War used to refer to themselves as 'we who have wrongfully survived'.

The third survivor is a woman sitting by her father's grave 'near the fork of two rivers, where Islam and Europe cross'. This lovely poem of pure hopelessness set in the world of mere normality is one of the most moving in the entire book. 'This woman has any age / but her time is just past beauty. Among graves and flowers / she sits to escape and find herself'. The fourth prays at a wayside shrine to the

*Virgin of the wayside  
familiar of ghosts and rainbows*

*lady of trinkets and spiders' webs  
behind mould-gathering silence,*

*hostess of moths, mosquitoes  
and insects of dusks and glooms,*

*model dressed in fool's gold*

and he admits 'we have come this far' but wonders ruefully 'whether she cares'. Is she merely the '*nurse of false alternatives*'? Recalling dead friends he finds 'the hardest gift to bear / is always the promise broken'.

Section 6, *Flight of the Imago* ('the perfect insect'), contains what may be the finest poem of all these fine poems. Entitled *Nothing is lost always* it is a lengthy disquisition on the phenomenon of time ('the carpet of galaxies moves away under your feet / while you still stand upon it'), inventive in imagery ('one day is a rich chaos unlike any other'), rooted in the everyday, noting 'a fisherman, knee-deep in a pond' and watching 'time's innermost fountain' while hearing 'its hidden language of glyphs and icons'. In parenthesis one must applaud the way Burns is not afraid to make full use of the whole glorious palette of our linguistic heritage – 'scry'. 'velar' (which I had to look up) – never being wilfully obscure or 'showing off' but confidently aware how vital it is to hit on the correct word unlike too many drab and sloppy versifiers of our time.

*Flight of the Imago* is the philosophical heart of the book. With long investigative lines he ponders the massive questions raised by the events and aftermath of October 1941. Here, children make 'secret pacts with angels...which get kept as lifelines for lifetimes'. The poet wonders what is thought of 'in the precise act of dying' – perhaps the unimportant but consoling details of decoration or duties of everyday living: 'shoelace left undone, unwatered plant on a windowsill, / sunlight-painted patch in an angle of a wall'. Why should someone 'who knows the ways / of petals and leaves' commit suicide? Why does impure chance pluck one to safety and leave another to be shot? Then, after citing examples of fatally bad luck in Hardy and Shakespeare, he writes this timely warning to force us into complicity, to make us come to terms with the fact we the readers are as vulnerable as anyone:

If only (*enter name*) hadn't got up to catch  
the earlier train for a meeting that September morning  
scheduled at the Twin Towers.

'A murdered man at one of the entrances to the Underworld' is told 'now you must pass for ever / out of time'. His entrance, like the one in Kafka's fable, is the one made specially for him. He may plead 'We had done nothing wrong. We deserve better than that.' In this bleak examination of a problem with no earthly solution, he is informed that life is over, that it must always be incomplete, that fate may let you 'sip a little' but that 'you can never drink enough'.

The poetry ends with seven short ‘blessings’. Poised between the dead and the unborn ‘giving and forgiving / life for the living’, a blue butterfly remains the symbol of a fragile hope – that visitor from nowhere, that temporary solace bearing no shadow of a solution but which, in the sixth *Flight* of Section 6, instructed us to

transform petty purpose into total celebration  
of now in the cup of always, always in the bow

Guestl of  
now...

a single note called hope...  
pouring music of impossibilities, rhythm of hallelujahs.

After the blessings come the harrowing photographs of the victims and the heartbreaking photostats of their hastily written final messages. Then history is placed in perspective with details of the Nazi occupation, the massacres themselves and the way, during the Communist regime under Tito, a yearly memorial ceremony was established which seems, rather sadly, in the new geography of the region, to have become ‘a more modest affair’. Maybe this is yet another example of human memories being so short, of innate reluctance to dwell on distressing events of the past – or of a cowardly ducking away from reality which books like this one are doing so much to dispel. And then the book concludes with a Serbo-Croat glossary and some useful notes on the poems.

*The Blue Butterfly* is a most important achievement – not only timely but couched in tautly emotional language so that we have to acknowledge the timelessness, the alas eternal relevance. Does hope *have* to be equated with nothing? This is the real question hovering behind these poems.

Harry Guest

Harry Guest’s most recent publication is the long poem *Comparisons* partnered with a selection of translations called *Conversions* which appeared from Shearsman in January. He has just finished translating Torsten Schulz’s novel *Boxhagener Platz* about life in the DDR in 1968.

Samuel John Perry

“So unreal”: The unhomey moment in the poetry of Philip Larkin

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>

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

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<sup>1</sup> A.T. Tolley, *My Proper Ground: A Study of the work of Philip Larkin and its Development*, (Edinburgh: EUP, 1991) 200-1.

<sup>2</sup> Philip Larkin, ‘Introduction to *All What Jazz*’, *Required Writing* (London: Faber, 1983) 297. All future citations to this volume are given as *RW*.

<sup>3</sup> Philip Larkin, ‘Big Victims: Emily Dickinson and Walter de la Mare’, *RW*, 197.

<sup>4</sup> James Fenton, *The Strength of Poetry* (Oxford: OUP, 2001) 45.

'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.

I

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:

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<sup>5</sup> Philip Larkin, 'The Large Cool Store', *Collected Poems*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber and The Marvell Press, 1988) 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 (*CP*, 235). Larkin went up to Oxford in October 1940.

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

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?  
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 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"

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<sup>8</sup> *CP*, 235.

<sup>9</sup> See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (London: SCM Press, 1962) 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". (*CP*, 56-7).

<sup>11</sup> *CP*, 248, my italics.

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>

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>

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<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 "unreally from the rest" (CP, 115). Similarly, in '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" (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". Brynmor Jones Library, Hull University Archives, second draft, 50.

<sup>13</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock with an introduction by Hugh Haughton (London: Penguin, 2003) 125. All future citation to this volume.

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

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 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?

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<sup>15</sup> ‘Out in the lane I pause’, *CP*, 253.

<sup>16</sup> Andrew Swarbrick, *Out of Reach: The Poetry of Philip Larkin* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996) 168.

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

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

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<sup>18</sup> CP, 80.

<sup>19</sup> CP, 80.

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 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 true 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

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<sup>20</sup> Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester: MUP, 2003) 2.

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

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; defamiliarizing 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,  
Pure coldness to our live, imperfect eyes  
That stare beyond this world, where nothing’s made  
As new or washed quite clean, seeking the home  
All such inhabit.<sup>23</sup>

The advertisements offer glimpses of a world which the speaker yearns for but which is ultimately inaccessible:

There, dark rafted pubs  
Are filled with white-clothed ones from tennis clubs,  
And the boy puking his heart out in the Gents  
Just missed them, as the pensioner paid  
A halfpenny more for Granny Graveclothes’ Tea  
To taste old age.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> See “‘Only in dreams’: Philip Larkin and Surrealism”, *English*, Spring 2010, 95-119.

<sup>23</sup> *CP*, 144.

<sup>24</sup> *CP*, 144.

“Home”, then, in this poem, is a word which invokes its opposite: the ‘unhomely’, and what I want to show in the second section of this essay is how Larkin’s susceptibility to such feelings informed his admiration for the poetry of Edward Thomas, someone whose relation to the world was as uncertain and nebulous as Larkin’s, and who provided him with an instructive example of how he might explore these peculiar states of consciousness; of unfamiliarity and unhomedness, in verse.

## II

Of course, Larkin is not the only twentieth century poet who has shown himself to be prone to feelings which we can think of in terms of the uncanny. The sense of dislocation and rootlessness experienced by T.S. Eliot’s protagonist in *The Waste Land*, most notably in the opening section with its nightmarish vision of the “Unreal city” can, quite clearly, be identified as the *unheimlich*.<sup>25</sup> Eliot’s poem also anticipates the more nostalgic elements of Larkin’s work in expressing (albeit in a markedly different manner) a desire for the order and stability of the past, for a time when identity, both personal and national, was less problematic. We know that, at some level, the uncanny may be bound up with feelings of “extreme nostalgia” or “homesickness”<sup>26</sup> and the preoccupation that Larkin’s poetry displays with feelings of what is often unaccountable loss and longing, a yearning for something just beyond reach, can certainly be related to such states of feeling.<sup>27</sup> The most obvious example is ‘MCMXIV’, but one could just as easily point to the final lines of ‘Dublinesque’ where, as the narrator watches the funeral procession wend its way through the city streets,

A voice is heard singing  
Of Kitty, or Katy,  
As if the name meant once

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<sup>25</sup> T.S. Eliot, *Selected Poems* (London: Faber, 1954) 53.

<sup>26</sup> Royle, *The Uncanny*, 2, my italics.

<sup>27</sup> The choices Larkin made when editing *The Oxford Book of English Verse*, which reflect his search for an English poetic tradition untainted by the excesses of modernism, can now be seen as symptomatic of this same yearning.

All love, all beauty.<sup>28</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>29</sup> While it is impossible to know for sure what Larkin meant by calling Edward Thomas's verse "modern"<sup>30</sup>, it is worth bearing in mind that for Freud 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>31</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>32</sup> the primitive strength of this religious impulse being emphasized 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,

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<sup>28</sup> *CP*, 178.

<sup>29</sup> Brynmor Jones Library, Hull University Archives, The Larkin-Sutton Letters, MS DP/174/2/22, f. 13r. See Guy Cuthbertson, 'The Teenage Poet and the Edward Thomas Poem', *Branch Lines: Edward Thomas and Contemporary Poetry*, ed. Guy Cuthbertson and Lucy Newlyn (London: Enitharmon, 2007) 51-63, 61. 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>30</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 "'Any-angled Light': Philip Larkin and Edward Thomas", *Poetry in the Wars* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1986) 113-139, 115.

<sup>31</sup> 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>32</sup> *CP*, 98.

Flashes afresh to hold and horrify.<sup>33</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>34</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 offices” and “Postmen like doctors go from house to house.”<sup>35</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>36</sup>

Even the most cursory glance through Edward Thomas’s writing is enough to tell us that he too was susceptible to the same kind of nightmarish fears which plagued Larkin’s imagination. His poetry is full of

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<sup>33</sup> *CP*, 208.

<sup>34</sup> ‘Nothing to be Said’, *CP*, 138.

<sup>35</sup> *CP*, 208.

<sup>36</sup> *CP*, 192, my italics.

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>37</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>38</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 governed by "what something hidden from us chose";<sup>39</sup> 'Send no Money', with its sense of a life disfigured into "*a shape no one sees*",<sup>40</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,

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<sup>37</sup> *ETCP*, 10. 'Old Man' is a cultivated shrub (clematis) related to the 'wild clematis' or 'Traveller's joy'.

<sup>38</sup> Freud, 'The Uncanny', 132.

<sup>39</sup> *CP*, 153.

<sup>40</sup> *CP*, 146.

Who now stands newly clear,  
Smiling, and recognising, and going dark.<sup>41</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, reading and failing to read, generating a series of tensions between real and artificial, past and present.

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>42</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>43</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>44</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*. Edward 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 Edward Thomas suffered a severe nervous breakdown, brought on by overwork and financial

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<sup>41</sup> *CP*, 144-5.

<sup>42</sup> Edna Longley, ‘Larkin, Edward Thomas and the Tradition’, *Phoenix* (Autumn and Winter, 1973/4) 63-89, 75. This essay was later developed into “‘Any-angled Light’: Philip Larkin and Edward Thomas’, *Poetry in the Wars*, 113-139.

<sup>43</sup> Edward Thomas, *Collected Poems*, ed. R. George Thomas, with an introduction by Peter Sacks (London: Faber, 2004) 43. All future references to this volume are given as *ETCP*.

<sup>44</sup> *CP*, 99.

**anxiety. Again, the poem expresses that extreme uncertainty of sense which is symptomatic of the uncanny:**

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>45</sup>

**This poem clearly struck an emotional chord with the young Larkin, because on the 16<sup>th</sup> of 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.**

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<sup>45</sup> *ETCP*, 47.

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>46</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 Edward 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 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’. 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*, Edward Thomas calls “those modern people who belong nowhere”.<sup>47</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,

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<sup>46</sup> Brynmor Jones Library, Notebook 5. ‘Single to Belfast’ was to remain unfinished.

<sup>47</sup> Edward Thomas, *The South Country* (London: Dent, 1993) 5.

Insisting so on difference, made me welcome:  
Once that was recognised, we were in touch.<sup>48</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>49</sup>

### III

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>50</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 W.H. Auden: "Do you like living in Hull?" he replied candidly, "I don't suppose I'm unhappier there than I should be anywhere else"<sup>51</sup> 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. In 'Here' the people of Humberside are

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<sup>48</sup> *CP*, 104.

<sup>49</sup> *CP*, 104. 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 of Philip Larkin 1940-1985*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber, 1992) 460.

<sup>50</sup> *Poetry and Posterity*, 197.

<sup>51</sup> Letter from Stephen Spender to Andrew Motion, 22 December 1989.

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>52</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>53</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

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<sup>52</sup> *CP*, 136.

<sup>53</sup> Noel Hughes, 'Going Home with Larkin', *London Magazine*, vol. xxix, nos. 1 and 2 (April/May 1989) 117.

forgotten boredom”.<sup>54</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  
Than one hired box should make him pretty sure  
He warranted no better, I don't know.<sup>55</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>56</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

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<sup>54</sup> CP, 33.

<sup>55</sup> CP, 102-3, my italics.

<sup>56</sup> Freud, 'The Uncanny', 142.

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>57</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>58</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 treated my father to before breakfast, and all of us at mealtimes,

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<sup>57</sup> *CP*, 102.

<sup>58</sup> Freud, 'The Uncanny', 124.

must have remained in my mind as something that I mustn't  
*under any circumstances* risk encountering again.<sup>59</sup>

For Freud, the *unheimlich* is “something that was long familiar to the psyche and was estranged from it only through being repressed”<sup>60</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 intentions 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>61</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>62</sup> Home isn't always sad, but Larkin invariably found it so; we don't, as in

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<sup>59</sup> Quoted by Andrew Motion in *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life*, (London: Faber, 1993) 13-15.

<sup>60</sup> Freud, ‘The Uncanny’, 148.

<sup>61</sup> Motion, 290.

<sup>62</sup> Motion, 214.

'Poetry of Departures', "all hate home / And having to be there",<sup>63</sup> but Larkin sometimes did, because its sterile bourgeois atmosphere – "The good books, the good bed"<sup>64</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 to love another."<sup>65</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>66</sup> James Booth has noted Larkin's difficulty with "letting someone in"<sup>67</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, unwilling to render itself more vulnerable in the openness to others that the expression of love involves. Writing to Monica Jones in 1966, Larkin admitted: "It's my own unwillingness to give myself to anyone that's at fault".<sup>68</sup> In Edward Thomas's verse, as in that of his Welsh namesake R.S. Thomas, the poet's sense of having 'come home' is inextricably linked to the experience of love:

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<sup>63</sup> 'Poetry of Departures', *CP*, 85.

<sup>64</sup> *CP*, 85.

<sup>65</sup> Jeremy Holmes, 'Narcissism', *On a darkling Plain: Journeys into the Unconscious*, ed. Ivan Ward (Cambridge: Icon, 2002) 183.

<sup>66</sup> *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". Brynmor Jones Library, Notebook 2.

<sup>67</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Writer* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992) 22.

<sup>68</sup> *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin 1940-85*, ed. Antony Thwaite (London: Faber, 1992) 386.

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>69</sup>

Although this connection is never made explicit it is no less central to Larkin’s poetry. 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>70</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>71</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  
By loving others, but across most it sweeps  
As all they might have done had they been loved.  
That nothing cures.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> *ETCP*, 35-6.

<sup>70</sup> *CP*, 111.

<sup>71</sup> *CP*, 215.

<sup>72</sup> *CP*, 126.

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.