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**LARKIN'S PENTECOSTAL EXPERIENCE – PRESENCE AND ABSENCE IN
'THE WHITSUN WEDDINGS'**

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Philip Larkin – by his own account and that of his critics – was neither a religious man nor a religious poet. Although baptized as an infant in the old Coventry Cathedral (and proud of it), his family were not churchgoers, and he apparently lost the vestiges of whatever childhood faith he may have had as a teenager. Towards the end of his life, Larkin would sometimes accompany his High Church lover Monica Jones to Sunday worship, and he had an Anglican funeral, but as he told John Haffenden, “I didn’t lose faith. I never had it.” (Qtd. Steinberg, 124) At the same time, it seems mistaken to characterise Philip Larkin as a virulent atheist or agnostic in the manner of a Richard Dawkins: as someone who saw religion as representing a real impediment to human progress.

The argument about Larkin’s religion has long ago been played out between the sceptics and the idealists (Almond, 183), with James Booth’s comment that Larkin “is unreligious rather than anti-religious” (Booth 1992, 136) being as good a conclusion as any. In this paper, I do not propose to reformulate the case for Larkin the Christian, but simply to consider the presence, or rather meaningful absence of religious experience in his best known and most popular poem, “The Whitsun Weddings” (1959). This long poem seems typical of the way that Larkin responds to religion throughout his oeuvre: first, as a reminder of his own mortality, and secondly, as a certain attitude to life, which although redundant, prods him into adopting the various attitudes that he does take as both a man and a poet.

“The Whitsun Weddings” tells the true story of a railway journey that Larkin took from his home in Hull to London one “sunlit Saturday” (l. 3). As the train journeys south, the poet gradually becomes aware of the newly-wed couples getting on at every station along the line, moving him from disinterest to an experience that he later described to Melvyn Bragg in quite transcendental terms:

I suppose the train stopped at about four, five, six stations between Hull and London and there was a sense of gathering emotional momentum. Every time you stopped fresh emotion climbed aboard. And finally between Peterborough and London when you hurtle on, you felt the whole thing was being aimed like a bullet – at the heart of things, you know. All this fresh, open life. Incredible experience. I’ve never forgotten it. (Qtd. Burnett, 411)

“The Whitsun Weddings” is not an especially dark or agnostic poem, but it is a poem about change and about how a series of images or “attitudes” culminate in its memorable conclusion (ll. 77-80):

We slowed again,
And as the tightened brakes took hold, there swelled
A sense of falling, like an arrow-shower
Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain.

The rain and the sense of anticlimax in these lines contain various possibilities: fertility and sexual release, the battles and sadness of married life, and the end that is mortality, and what Larkin calls bleakly in his “Aubade” (1977) “the total emptiness for ever” (l. 16).

“The Whitsun Weddings” is a nonreligious poem, but, as I will argue, its Christian setting of the late spring festival of Pentecost, or Whitsun, cannot be easily ignored, but before exploring this background I would like to consider in more depth Larkin’s religious views. Larkin was agnostic, and in “Aubade”, his final meditation on mortality, he recognises that if he is to be true to his agnosticism he must reject the consolations of orthodox faith and accept the finality of death as an end to all sensual pleasures. He was a sensual personality after all, and we know that his diagnosis with cancer in 1985 left him deeply depressed, and that right at the end he was only able to recover his sense of irony under heavy sedation as he entered hospital for the last time. His final words “I am going to the unavoidable” were not, therefore, the heroic fulfilment of a lifetime of denial but as ambiguous as his agnosticism. He was simply telling the nurse that he knew that the time had come for him to die.

In “Aubade”, Larkin emphasises the point about death that there is nothing in human experience to allay the fear of complete extinction (ll. 27-30):

no sight, no sound,
No touch or taste or smell, nothing to think with,
Nothing to love or link with,
The anaesthetic from which none come round.

The syncopated rhythm of these lines seems to echo the jazz that Larkin so loved, and which would be most representative of the sensual pleasures of which death would deprive him. In the same poem, Larkin dismisses religion as (ll. 23-24)

That vast, moth-eaten musical brocade
Created to pretend we never die

Larkin’s derogatory tone conceals a serious point that he is no longer living in an age when belief in the afterlife can be taken for granted, so adopts the persona of perhaps the majority of his readers who have lost faith and stopped going to church.

The decline of Britain’s Christian culture is particularly associated with the secularisation of the 1960s, but is a trend that dates back at least as far as the early 20th century. Larkin’s metaphor of the “moth-eaten musical brocade” is echoed in his much earlier “Church Going” (1955), in which he writes of human “compulsions” (l. 56) “robed as destinies”. Faith becomes a robe that protects believers from the harsh realities of life, but the same could be said for any attitude or “compulsion”; in “For Sidney Bechet” (1956), there are the scholars *manqués* who “nod around unnoticed / Wrapped up in personnels like old plaids.” (ll. 11-12)

and therefore a robe for which there may be many slighter alternatives, including Larkin's agnosticism. In a letter to his friend Jim Sutton, Larkin wrote

religion – well, nobody gives a darn for that any longer, not in England, anyway. Methodism caught on fine in the 18th century, but it's worn thin now. (Qtd. Brennan, 81)

The use of the word “darn” is telling when one considers its alternative connotation of mending socks. Religion for Larkin is a garment or attitude that lasts as long as it can last, and it is this reluctance to differentiate religious practice from any other set of attitudes, including whatever it means “to be young”, that constitutes the second dimension of Larkin's reputation as an unreligious poet.

Larkin's “attitudes” recall his debt to Yeatsian symbolism, his eye for detail and his sense of humour, and as a poetic philosophy and creed they mean to construct a life out of what comes up. Detached from any religious framework to stipulate the correct “way of life”, Larkin seeks the most convincing attitude or posture, and sticks with that attitude for as long as it remains credible; that attitude may indeed be no more than an impersonation of adulthood. Larkin wrote in a review of the Opies' *Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* (1959) that

It was that verse about becoming again as a little child that caused the first sharp waning of my Christian sympathies. If the Kingdom of Heaven could be entered only by those fulfilling such a condition I knew I should be unhappy there. (Larkin, 111)

Larkin wanted to be the bespectacled, serious adolescent listening to jazz in his bedroom with his friends; he didn't want the pram in the hall.

John Osborne argues that not only is “The Whitsun Weddings” but also that it responds intertextually to one of the most religious poems of the 20th century, T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, written in 1922, the year of Larkin's birth. Osborne notices several parallels, such as that “Both poems begin with departures from the north, Eliot's ‘I read, much of the night, and go south in winter’ becoming Larkin's ‘slow and stopping curve southwards’” (Osborne, 60), and concludes that

By stripping the occasion of the religiosity the Whit connection affords, and in the process mounting a critique of Eliot's moral repression and body hatred, [“The Whitsun Weddings”] celebrates the act of consummation, as though sexual union has a consecration of its own requiring no theological blessing. (Ibid., 63)

Eliot's poem portrays a spiritually sterile culture for which sexual freedom is not the answer, whereas for Larkin the sexual possibilities of marriage seem to represent a very real freedom away from the impoverishment of early post-war British society, and

The narrator's observation that ‘the girls’ wear ‘nylon gloves and jewellery-substitutes’, so often cited as proof of Larkin's middle-class condescension, is actually rather a delicate statement of an economic reality, that the rush to meet the tax deadline was most conspicuous in lower-income groups for whom every penny counts (and who go off on honeymoon by public transport). (Ibid.)

It is well known that Larkin's problem was not just with T.S. Eliot but with modernism as a whole, and according to Osborne is manifest in Larkin's instinctive tendency to deconstruct

modernist binaries. Of course, contemporary theology has sought to accommodate itself to postmodernism, for example in the view of deconstruction as “an exercise in longing for God or participating in God’s longing for us” (Ward, 91), and Derrida’s longing for “a forgiveness without power” (Derrida, 59) may for many seem “a consummation devoutly to be wished”. The apparent irrelevance of “the Whit connection” may indicate some deferred spiritual meaning, especially when we consider that in contemporary theology the spiritual life is often compared to a journey: not to some medieval allegory leading to predictable rewards and punishments but to a disconnected series of moments that acquire symbolic power and meaning within the integrative but arbitrary structure of the journey. This is a journey of negation as well as affirmation in which every separation is a cause for relief as well as tears, and thoughts and feelings acquire meaning in a complex and unstable network of relationships. The poem’s Pentecostal background is certainly worth investigating.

Larkin’s reluctance to impose meaning is expressed in his view of the journey as no more than a “frail / Travelling coincidence” (ll. 74-5). The frailty of that experience acquires symbolic value through an accident of British tax law and the mechanics of a steam engine. Nicholas Marsh identifies a tension at work within the poem “between guarded objectivity” and “flights of metaphor” that “are left in exact and unresolved tension at the end” (Marsh, 76). Deconstructing that binary, one might observe that the changing speeds of the train and the speaker’s proximity to the wedding couples cause him to lose objectivity, or rather that his objectivity is something that can only be regained in hindsight. Larkin wrote the poem in 1957 about an experience he had had in July 1955, actually a couple of months after Whitsun.

In rather more straightforward terms, Gillian Steinberg argues that because Larkin rejects the certainties of religious orthodoxy he is drawn instead toward self-questioning and empathy (Steinberg, 146), and this impetus toward empathy may be reflected in Marsh’s tension between objectivity and metaphor. Objectivity is a gathering of facts about the human condition, metaphor the making of comparisons and connections. In the Christian narrative, the great “facts” of the life of Christ are the birth of Jesus at Christmas, his death on Good Friday, and resurrection at Easter. Yet it was not until fifty days after Easter that the full import of Christ’s message comes alive in the hearts of the disciples at the feast of Pentecost, when they were quite literally inspired by the Holy Spirit to found the Church that would spread that message. Since Pentecost was an ancient festival commemorating the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai, the Holy Spirit is seen to work through both the historical framework of the Jewish calendar and the disciples’ trepidation, since they knew they were bound to be persecuted by the Jewish and Roman authorities.

As Osborne notes, the meaning of Whitsun in “The Whitsun Weddings” is primarily that of a tax incentive for the less well-off, but even – and indeed particularly – in a traditionally Christian country like Britain, tax breaks can serve to promote the Christian institution of marriage, to cooperate with the human tendency for delay and trepidation, and above all give couples on low incomes a momentary financial power that is equivalent to the spiritual power granted to the disciples at Pentecost: the spiritual dimension of the Welfare State, if you will. Pentecost is remembered as the Church’s birthday, the first day of the Church year, the day on which the Gospel became consolidated among the disciples, and the Church became institutionalised as an organisation whose imperative was to practise *koinonia* and to preach the gospel among the nations. Yet they were still preaching to the converted, and so the next dramatic act in this narrative is the conversion of St Paul after he was blinded by a divine light on the road to Damascus where he was heading to persecute members of the new Christian sect.

Osborne and other critics are right to insist on the lack of explicit religious imagery in “The Whitsun Weddings”, but the Pentecostal setting still seems to me an undeniable subtext

that is played out as a metaphor of postponed realisation. In the very first line, the speaker mentions that he was “late getting away” (l. 1): late according to his own professional schedule but not too late to catch a train and get to London. What begins as a rather humdrum detail becomes the central theme of the poem: this is not the immediate joy of Easter, of spring in its first buds, but the afterthought of Pentecost, when spring in England is at its very height, tipping into summer, when – as he puts it in “The Trees” (1968) – “the unresting castles thresh / In fullgrown thickness every May.” (ll. 9-10) Larkin experiences this change or becoming as a shift from indecision to resolve, both his own and that of the wedding parties he sees on the station platform stations. In the third stanza (ll. 28-37), he notices

 them, grinning and pomaded, girls
In parodies of fashion, heels and veils,
All posed irresolutely, watching us go,

As if out on the end of an event
 Waving goodbye
To something that survived it. Struck, I leant
More promptly out next time, more curiously,
And saw it all again in different terms:
The fathers with broad belts under their suits
And seamy foreheads; mothers loud and fat

This shift in perception may also be equivalent to the difference between “The women” who “shared / The secret like a happy funeral” (ll. 52-3) and the “girls, gripping their handbags tighter”, who “stared / At a religious wounding.” (ll. 54-5) Larkin is referring to 1950s Britain, when premarital sex was still the exception rather than the norm, and even for non-believers still shrouded with a degree of guilt. Larkin himself was not especially critical of sex before marriage, or rather he was less sympathetic toward the whole business of sex itself as messy and depressing. The contrast of simile (“like a happy funeral”) with metaphor (“a religious wounding”) separates the spheres of known and unknown experience in a way that resonates in the poem’s theological hinterland.

Larkin’s narrator can make no claim to understanding the inner thoughts and feelings of the people he sees on the platforms, although he can still memorialise “this hour” (l. 68) of silent fellowship shared in a railway carriage as they race towards London. Larkin’s Whitsun is undoubtedly less intense or dramatic than the first Pentecost, when, as the Book of Acts tells us (Acts 2: 2-4),

2. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting.
3. And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them.
4. And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.

Larkin’s poem is not a windy poem, although it is a poem imbued with a spiritual quality that may surprise even the poet itself. At Pentecost, people of many nations and languages came together and were able to understand each other through the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2: 6-11). The narrator and the couples have little in common with each other except the visual language of marriage, traditionally associated with the colour white. This association is

somewhat misleading when we consider that the purity symbolised by the white wedding may in fact conceal other realities, and that although in the early church adult converts were baptised at Pentecost and wore white robes to mark their purification, the actual colour of Pentecost is the red fire of the Holy Spirit. Larkin's poem is coloured with both the white of Whitsun ("White Sunday") and the colourful details that stand against a white background, "The lemons, mauves, and olive ochres" (l. 40) and "the tall heat" (l. 11) of the sun.

Apart from the title, the colourless colour white is absent from the poem, and, as I have been arguing, is an absence that allows the poem to happen; we never get to see the brides in their wedding dresses. The colour white is the colour of the newly baptised as they begin their new lives as Christians, and it is the colour of the blank page on which the newlywed couples begin their lives together. It is the colour that inspires Larkin to write his poem and for "A dozen marriages" to get "under way" (l. 63), but in the poem's rhetoric the institution of marriage that it symbolises is an ideal that conflicts with the human potential both for failure and for overcoming failure. As an ideal, it also conflicts with the sense of movement and change that is intrinsic to the journey that frames the poem. Where the blankness (or "whiteness") of tradition may be more present is in the poem's prosody, comprising eight stanzas of ten lines each, each line being a perfect iambic pentameter (except the second in each stanza). The rhyme scheme of abab cde cde also implies a perfection of form that could refer to the ideals of an institution such as marriage, while the short second lines could serve as a none too subtle reminder that Larkin as the poet, the poem's shaper, is by his nature questioning what he sees. Likewise, the alliteration on "w" in the title might indicate wind, the wind of the Holy Spirit.

Among those present in Jerusalem that first Pentecost was Larkin's namesake, the apostle Philip, who was crucified in Hierapolis in modern-day Turkey in AD 80 and is particularly associated with the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000. Jesus tests Philip's faith by asking him, "Whence shall we buy bread, that these may eat?" (John 6: 5), to which Philip replies, "Two hundred pennyworth of bread is not sufficient for them, that every one of them may take a little." (John 6: 6) St John's Gospel does not explain how Philip reacts to the miracle that Jesus then performs, but in the 1950s to the more contemporary questions of how do you feed, how do you house, how do you employ impoverished newly-wed couples, the answers might lie in London's "postal districts packed like squares of wheat" (l. 70). These districts (SW1, EC4 and so on) conceal the ministries and head offices that redistribute wealth and keep the economy ticking over. As postal districts, they are also emblematic of all the acts of communication upon which a mature civilization relies.

St Philip is one of the lesser known disciples, often pictured with a basket of loaves, which in Larkin's case might be compared to the volumes he purveyed to a student population of at least 5,000 in his role as a university librarian. Philip is the fifth disciple after Simon Peter, John, James and Andrew, and having a Greek name was probably a Greek speaker. As the fifth disciple, his feast falls in the month of May, the fifth month of the year, close to the feast of Pentecost. As an educated Greek speaker, he may well have contributed to the early church a knowledge of conventions similar to the five-footed iambic pentameter in English poetics; the five-pointed star or pentagram has its own history in Christianity as being a shape that is strong enough to keep out the devil. Philip is equally the kind of modestly anonymous Christian that Larkin might have aspired to become had he himself been a Christian, and which in the poem he does in a sense become through the narrator's presence in the railway carriage. The narrator looks at everyone but no one appears to look at him, and yet Larkin fulfils the charitable role of recording these Whitsun weddings for posterity.

As I have mentioned, the apostle who comes after Pentecost is Paul, which spelt in English is close to Larkin's initials P.A.L. (Philip Arthur Larkin). The name "Paul" means "small" or "humble", when in fact Philip Larkin was tall and certainly ambitious, if not conceited, but it seems that if only Philip had found his "you" or "other" then he could have become a Paul, or rather that it is through the cooperation between the poet and his readers that he is able to acquire something like humility. A further point may be made, which is that although Philip is by tradition the fifth of the disciples, this poem comprises eight not five stanzas, and the eighth disciple is disputed to be either Matthew the tax collector or Thomas the doubter. Both of these roles seem relevant to the poem: Matthew quite literally as the tax authority whose benevolence authorises the marriage and Thomas whose scepticism characterises both Larkin himself and perhaps even the couples who have held back so long.

If "The Whitsun Weddings" is a May poem, then it reaches its climax in the fifth stanza, when "as we moved, each face seemed to face to define / Just what it saw departing" (ll. 48-9). This is a moment of truth or mutual recognition, but in fact the poem extends into August – as it were – to a full eight stanzas, as if like the tax break the weddings give the young couples a little extra energy to get them on their way: regardless of what the couples actually feel for each other, the very institution of marriage contains its own hidden momentum that is similar to the momentum of iambic meter.

Unlike St Paul, Larkin experiences no blinding light convincing him of the desirability of marriage, and yet the motif of enlightenment does not seem to me completely lacking from the poem. In the third stanza, Larkin comments wryly that "sun destroys / The interest of what's happening in the shade" (ll. 23-4). At face value, this is a stark statement: "The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away" (Job 1: 21). The government grants a tax break, but then some fiercer presence like the sun sucks off any interest accrued on the capital of human enterprise. In the poem's context, that interest may comprise no more than the children who have grown up and now are pulled away from the family home to repeat the circle in a life of homemaking and labour: to "London spread out in the sun" (l. 69).

In a Christian context, the sun is a symbol of spiritual enlightenment that may be punned fortuitously with the Son of God. Larkin may be hinting as much in his aside in lines 23 and 24, touching on an old literary grudge (Donne's "busy old fool, unruly sun") that the Light of the World reveals too much, and renders plain human "larking about" uninteresting. One can imagine the narrator being charmed by the sunlit landscape he sees from the railway carriage and losing touch with a shadier reality, but in fact the light may also serve to reveal the shady side of life, although not in the accidental, disconnected logic of the poem.

There are three flashes of light in "The Whitsun Weddings": the "blinding windscreens" (l. 8) of motor cars as the train leaves Hull, "A hothouse" that "flashed uniquely" (l. 16), and "Bright knots of rail" (l. 72) as the train crosses other tracks on its final path into London. The "blinding windscreens" denote a mode of transport that Larkin on this occasion forgoes; the opportunity to obtain a driving licence and drive on public roads at the age of 17 is a rite of passage in British society. The hothouse may be the academic hothouse, in Larkin's case Oxford, from which he graduated with a 1st class honours degree in 1943, and the "Bright knots" may be marriage itself or indeed any other commitment that pulls the individual forward on life's journey. None of these flashes are connected directly with the wedding parties, but they do in their contingency seem to epitomise the inspired and spontaneous manner in which the narrator interprets what he experiences as an unanticipated body of "fresh, open life". "The Whitsun Weddings" is an unreligious poem by an unreligious poet but one for which "the Whit connection" is quite a strong connection.

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