

# Holiness in the Poetries of Philip Larkin

Dr. Ruchika<sup>1</sup> and pushpak dagar<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Scholar of CMJ University, Shillong, Meghalya India.

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## Abstract

Philip Arthur Larkin, (9 August 1922 -2 December 1985) Philip Arthur Larkin, (9 August 1922 -2 December 1985) is widely regarded as one of the great English poets of the latter half of the twentieth century. His first book of poetry, *The North Ship*, was published in 1945, followed by two novels, *Jill* (1946) and *A Girl in Winter* (1947), but he came to prominence in 1955 with the publication of his second collection of poems, *The Less Deceived*, followed by *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964) and *High Windows* (1974). He contributed to *The Daily Telegraph* as its jazz critic from 1961 to 1971, articles gathered together in *All What Jazz: A Record Diary 1961-71* (1985), book cover above, and he edited *The Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse* (1973). He was the recipient of many honors, including the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry. He was offered, but declined, the position of poet laureate in 1984, following the death of John Betjeman.

**Index terms**— holiness of the drab, of the quiet passion and persistence of submerged lives, of the heroism of compromise with frustration, passionate engagement wi

## 1 Introduction study of Philip Larkin's four volumes of poetry,

*The North Ship* (1945), *The Less Deceived* (1955), *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964), and *High Windows* (1974), confirms that his poetry is "an affair of sanity, of seeing things as they are" ("Big Victims" 368). Typically his is a skeptical vision; indeed, he has been called "unillusioned, with a metaphysical zero in his bones" (Bedient 70). David Timms argues that Larkin's poetry as a whole "sees life as a bleak, sometimes horrifying business" (97). Ian Hamilton agrees and adds that the biggest problem with Larkin's poetry is its "rather narrow range of negative attitudes" (102). Eric Homberger calls him "the saddest heart in the post-war supermarket" (74), while Geoffrey Thurley writes about Larkin's "central dread of satisfaction" (145).

It must be admitted that there is a strong current of skepticism running through Larkin's poetry. In "Kick up the fire, and let the flames break loose" from *The North Ship* Larkin writes about the human need for companionship; he suggests that when we are with a friend, we "prolong the talk on this or that excuse" in an effort to avoid being alone. Unfortunately, "when the guest / Has stepped into the windy street, and gone, / Who can confront / The instantaneous grief of being alone?" Although we find some comfort and meaning in the company of a friend, as soon as we are left alone, the reality of our personal isolation crashes down upon us with frightening implications.

"Going" from *The Less Deceived* is about death, and, according to Andrew Motion, is the kind of poem for which Larkin "is so often regarded as an unrelievedly pessimistic poet" (69). The poem begins with an ominously overpowering image: "There is an evening coming in / Across the fields, one never seen before, / That lights no lamps." The approaching darkness intimated here is suffocating, deadening, confining. In addition, it is frightening: "Silken it seems at a distance, yet / When it is drawn up over the knees and breast / It brings no comfort." This is no "down blanket" of a quiet evening bringing with it the kind of peace Keats writes about in his "Sonnet to Sleep": O soft embalmer of the still midnight, Shutting with careful fingers and benign Our gloom-pleas'd eyes, embower'd from the light, Enshaded in forgetfulness divine.

## 2 II.

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Instead, Larkin's poem ends with a series of questions underscoring the "going" of light, or, more to the point, the coming of a vast, nullifying darkness:

Where has the tree gone, that locked Earth to sky? What is under my hands, That I cannot feel? What loads my hands down?

Many poems, such as "Mr. Bleaney," "Nothings to be Said," and "Dockery and Son" from *The Whitsun Weddings* and "The Old Fools," "Going, Going," and "This Be the Verse" from *High Windows* strike similarly skeptical chords. According to Philip Gardner, "the A consolations of religious belief are no more available to Larkin than they were to Matthew Arnold; the 'sea of faith' has ebbed" (94). However, other critics, while admitting that Larkin "has often been regarded as a hopeless and inflexible pessimist," suggest that his "poems are not as narrowly circumscribed as has often been claimed" (Motion 59). C. B. Cox says that his poetry "expresses uncertainty" and "a feeling of rootlessness" (14), but "his mood is never one of despair, and often there is a deep yearning for an escape from futility" (15)(16). Barbara Everett argues that all of Larkin's poems "pursue a faithfulness that will make them in some sense 'like a heaven': but this heaven is essentially a fallen Eden, a dwindling Paradise glimpsed always from the outside and through a vision of limits" (45-46). Tony Whalen writes that "Larkin's tendency is to record his moment of mystical flight and at the same time hold back from the 'swing along to the infinite nothing' . . . His classical attitude holds him back from the conclusiveness of faith." Whalen also sees in some of Larkin's poems "a gesturing toward an eternal land of the spirit" (52-53).

Chief among these revisionists is Seamus Heaney. While admitting that Larkin's poetry "refuses alibis" about the "conditions of contemporary life," Heaney writes that there survives in him a repining for a more crystalline reality to which he might give allegiance. When that repining finds expression something opens and moments occur which deserve to be called visionary. Because he is suspicious of any easy consolation, he is sparing of such moments, yet when they come they stream into the discursive and exacting world of his poetry with such trustworthy force that they call for attention. (132)

Later he adds that Larkin's skepticism is often modified by a mood he calls elysian, and he cites poems like "At Grass," "MCLMXIV," "How Distant" and "The Explosion" as examples of this mood. All these poems, says Heaney, "are visions of 'the old Platonic England,' the light in them honeyed by attachment to a dream world that will not be denied because it is at the foundation of the poet's sensibility" (137). Finally, Heaney says "in the poems [Larkin] has written there is enough reach and longing to show that he does not completely settle for that well-known bargain offer, 'a poetry of lowered sights and patently diminished expectations'" (138).

What has not been discussed by these revisionists, however, is the frequency with which these moments of mystical flight, these gesturings toward the eternal land of the spirit, these moments of longing or yearning for a bygone metaphysical experience appear in Larkin's poems containing sacramental settings, motifs, images, and symbols. Although individual poems such as "Church Going" and "The Building" have been partially explored from this point of view, no one has surveyed on a larger scale the sacramental in Larkin's poetry. Accordingly, this paper argues Larkin's use of sacramental motifs follows a pattern missed by the revisionists that illustrates his growing curiosity about spiritual matters. That is, despite his agnosticism, his frequent focus on sacramental motifs belies the idea that he totally dismisses things spiritual and infers instead a developing if muted affirmation. The focus of this study, therefore, is upon the sacramental in his poetry-what it is for Larkin, its regular appearance in poems that may be better called meditations, and its role in what Heaney calls the visionary moment.

The holiness in Larkin's poetry is of course not linked to a fully realized experience of spiritual grace. While a holiness is normally defined as a sign, seal, or symbol of Christian experience or profession-the visible means by which divine grace is sought or conferred-in Larkin's poetry the holiness may be defined as that which suggests a metaphysical mystery or secret somehow just beyond human understanding. It is not holy or sacred, but is instead evocative of Heaney's visionary moment. Sometimes there is the suggestion that the persona in one of his poems intuitively grasps the existence of the holiness; often this occurs unexpectedly while the persona is meditating on some unrelated topic. This experience, while momentary, belies Larkin's otherwise terse, slightly repressed inventory of a world stripped of spiritual meaning. His holiness relics may have relinquished their transforming power, but the fact that he muses on them at all indicates they have not lost for him their mysterious, their secret appeal. He is fascinated with how to interpret the holiness in light of his own penchant for skepticism.

There are many poems where holiness motifs ambalances "like closed confessionals," baptism, churches, church-substitutes, the Eucharist, faith healings, graveyards, weddings, and paradise-are used to expose visionary moments. Motion notes that the "value of rescuing the affirmative aspects of his work from neglect is not to make him seem a covertly optimistic poet but to expose the typical structure of his poems as a debate between hope and hopelessness, between fulfillment and disappointment" (72). More importantly, the argument here is not that Larkin's use of sacramental motifs demonstrates his latent Christian belief; instead, it is that his essentially skeptical view of life is tempered by sacramental motifs that suggest his "durable respect for the Christianity of the past" (Whalen 59). Many reveal an inarticulate longing for the visionary gleam once linked to metaphysical belief. It is as if these sacramental motifs, while stripped of their traditional Christian meanings, are used by Larkin to show a yearning or longing for a visionary moment.

As if to highlight Larkin's holiness and sacramental, many of his poems are meditations: deep, thoughtful reflections on personal experiences. Typically, a persona begins by contemplating a character, setting, or idea—often within a secular context—and then as he processes his thoughts he shifts to a new and unexpected perspective. In his musings on the experience its sacramental significance thrusts itself momentarily to the surface and challenges his skepticism. Many of these meditations contain rhetorical questions (a common occurrence in Larkin's poetry) that the persona appears to answer in a skeptical way while gesturing in a hesitant, fleeting way toward a metaphysical one. Frequently the persona is surprised at the dissonance this experience causes—his long held skepticism is briefly undercut and the glimpse of something mysterious and secret is intensely alluring. As a chronological survey of his four volumes will show, Larkin's skeptical persona has his cynicism modified by these visionary insights. Each volume deals progressively more directly with sacramental motifs culminating in three poems in *The Whitsun Weddings* that are explicitly religiously focused. Although his last volume *High Windows* appears initially to retreat to a persona untouched by holiness motifs, a closer examination shows that the visionary insight still impacts significantly on the persona and tempers his skepticism.

In *The North Ship* sacramental motifs appear infrequently. Although words like "angel," "grace," "miracle," "paradise," "saint," "sanctuary," and "seraphim" dot the volume, only "To Write One Song" focuses upon a sacramental motif. The poem begins with a persona who meditates on his desire to write a song "As sad as yard to visit the dead," perhaps to gain melancholic inspiration in a manner similar to the eighteenth century "graveyard" poets. At first his visit to "Headstone and wet cross / Paths where the mourners tread" works to produce the sadness he desires; the graves help to "call up the shade of loss." But then, unexpectedly, the morning sun floods the scene and the graveyard is no longer a place of sadness:

That stones would shine like gold Above each sodden grave, This, I had not foretold, Nor the birds' clamour, nor The image morning gave Of more and ever more, As some vast seven-piled wave, Mane-flinging, manifold, Streams at an endless shore.

On the one hand, the graves are "sodden," suggesting that the souls within are waterlogged, held down. On the other, the unexpected moment when the graveyard is washed in golden sunlight suggests a visionary insight akin to Hardy's in "The Darkling Thrush" when the speaker is encouraged by the bird's song: "That I could think there trembled through / His happy good-night air / Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew / And I was unaware." Here, Larkin's persona is clearly surprised: "This, I had not foretold." Furthermore, that this image gathers itself up into a "seven-piled wave" to stream "at an endless shore" is an apt ending to a paradoxically visionary moment: affirmation in a graveyard. Although it would be stretching things to say that this affirmation may carry with it traditional Christian overtones akin to Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," it is possible to say that a mysterious, unexpected transaction occurs catching the persona off-guard in this short meditation.

Larkin's second volume, *The Less Deceived*, uses religious language sparingly, and only two poems contain sacramental motifs. The first, "Wedding-Wind", does not focus on the sacramental significance of a young woman's marriage as much as it does on the wind as a powerful metaphor of her new relationship with her husband. "Church Going," his most anthologized poem, is, according to Larkin, about "going to church, not religion. I tried to suggest this by the title—and the union of the important stages of human life—birth, marriage and death—that going to church represent" ("Four Conversations" 73). R. N. Parkinson says that "the whole tone of the poem expresses doubts about the validity of atheism either as a creed or as an attitude" (224). In this meditation a persona is taken completely by surprise by the strong feelings of identification he has with a rather mundane, perhaps seldom used, church. The visionary moment occurs when he tries to articulate this identification.

The meditation begins as a passing bicyclist pauses for a few awkward moments inside a small, empty church. At first his thoughts make it just "another church" filled with religious relics: "little books," a "small neat organ," "some brass and stuff / Up at the holy end," "parchment, plate, and pyx." Although there is nothing special or noteworthy about the church, the fact it is a religious place filled with sacramental associations leads him into a whimsical act of respect: "Hatless, I take off / My cycle-clips in awkward reverence." His whimsy continues as he touches the baptismal font, looks about at the church's successful renovation project, and then mounts the lectern to preach "here endeth." The irony of these words as "the echoes snigger briefly" is linked to the poem's title; that is, there is a sense in which this is a meditation about how the church is going out of use in modern life—it is irrelevant in contemporary English society. The words "here endeth", therefore, may suggest the church's redundancy. In addition, these lines recall that "here endeth" may paradoxically suggest his own church going is not over, not ending, and so the echoing sniggers are directed at him from an imaginary audience.

For instance, it is clear the persona enjoys, for a reason he has difficulty articulating, church going. As he leaves the church he offers an Irish sixpence (worthless or "funny" money); while the offering is in one sense irreverent, it does recall Ireland as deeply religious, and Yeats, an early influence on Larkin, whose emphasis on ritualistic ceremonies outside of traditional Christianity is significant for this discussion. As he drops in his token offering, he reflects: ( D D D D ) E Year

The place was not worth stopping for. Yet stop I did: in fact I often do, And always end much at a loss like this, Wondering what to look for.

Not only has he stopped this one time, it is clear he often stops at churches. Each time, however, he admits to being similarly frustrated: though churches apparently have no traditionally Christian sacramental significance

for him, they do have some significance that he longs to understand. At this point in his meditation, he yearns for a visionary moment (that is why he has stopped once again at this particular church), but he remains unenlightened. Thus his musings continue (perhaps this explains why "Church Going" is one of Larkin's longer poems) as he struggles to explore what it is that draws him to stop and to visit churches.

As he plumbs the depths of his ecclesiastical attraction, he begins to wonder; actually for much of the rest of this meditation he is wondering about churches. Larkin's use of wonder and wondering is instructive since both words support the notion of the persona's admiration, astonishment, surprise, and amazement at the incommunicable yearning he feels in churches. His wonder, his curiosity perhaps mingled with doubt, characterizes the poem until the very end. So it is that he wonders what will happen once "churches fall completely out of use." Will they gradually become museum pieces (cathedrals "chronically on show"), deserted shells, animal stables ("let the rest rent-free to rain and sheep"), haunted houses ("unlucky" places), or magical fortresses? What will happen when the numinous, the mysterious, the secret, the sacramental, and the divine about churches passes away? "But superstition, like belief, must die, / And what remains when disbelief has gone?" To his rhetorical question he answers: "Grass, weedy pavement, brambles, buttress, sky, / A shape less recognizable each week, / A purpose more obscure." At this point his skepticism deflects his wonder and the possibility for a visionary moment appears unlikely.

But then he wonders again: who will be the last people to visit churches? His first answer suggests with sustained irony that the final visitors to the church will be ecclesiastical anthropologists, antique collectors, or "Christmas-addict[s]" who will scatter through the church intent on carting off whatever they deem worthy of reclamation, in the process stripping the church of its now forgotten religious dignity. However, his second answer is very revealing since he wonders if the final visitors will include someone like himself:

Or will he be my representative, Bored, uninformed, knowing the ghostly silt Dispersed, yet tending to this cross of ground Through suburb scrub because it held unspilt So long and equably what since is found Only in separation-marriage, and birth, And death, and thoughts of these-for which was built This special shell?

His wondering here clearly indicates a longing for the visionary; though believing the traditional religious significance of churches has been dispersed, he still finds himself "tending to this cross of ground" because of what it once represented and affirmed, at least on the ceremonial level-birth, marriage, and death. As Whalen writes, the persona here "demonstrates a longing for its ritual integrity, its past vitality" (59). Churches are important to him because they are "the visible and outward sign of devout contemplation, bringing into focus the bearing of ethics, philosophy, and history upon human nature" (Parkinson 229).

After this pre-visionary thought, the meditation ends in as close to a fully realized visionary moment as can be found in Larkin:

For though I've no idea What this accoutred frosty barn is worth, It pleases me to stand in silence here: A serious house on serious earth it is, In whose blent air all our compulsions meet, Are recognized, and robed as destinies. And that much never can be obsolete, Since someone will forever be surprising A hunger in himself to be more serious, And gravitating with it to this ground, Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in, If only that so many dead lie round.

The speaker, unable to believe in the transforming power of traditional Christian faith, yet affirms the holiness power churches hold on human imagination. In them he finds his hunger or yearning for the mysterious and the secret most nearly answered: "some will forever be surprising / A hunger in himself to be more serious." Parkinson goes too far when he argues that the poem "is a typically mid-twentieth century negative-seeming affirmation of the need for faith and of the existence of faith under the most unexpected guises and circumstances." However, he is closer to the truth when he adds: "The connotations of the words in Larkin's poem are used to disarm the skeptical reader of his own skepticism for long enough to persuade him to admit the necessity and legitimacy of metaphysical speculation" (231). Thus, "Church Going" is one of Larkin's poems where the visionary moment is most nearly realized and least tempered by skepticism.

In *The Whitsun Weddings* there are three poems that employ holiness motifs. In "Faith Healing" the emphasis is on a sacramental event as Larkin investigates the phenomenon of faith healing. Both Biblical authority and traditional Christian practice recognize the relationship between physical healing and personal faith. There are numerous examples of Jesus and his disciples healing people based on faith, the most notable being the woman who had been hemorrhaging for twelve years; after she managed to touch Jesus, he said to her: "Daughter, take courage; your faith has made you well" (Matt. IX, 22). In addition, since Pentecost (Acts II) outbreaks of revival within the church have often been accompanied by physical manifestations including glossolalia, physical healings, and other emotional phenomena. George Whitefield, the most famous preacher during the Great Awakening of the early eighteenth century, is frequently considered responsible for encouraging such physical displays among those who heard him. According to one authority, "certain bodily disturbances?made their appearance in connection with some British and American revivals. Many persons were affected with violent breathings and convulsions and other physical symptoms" (Lacy 27). Other reports note "emotionalized men and women weeping, groaning, shouting, jerking, and dancing, or falling into trances and torpors" (75). More recently some television evangelists among others have carried on this tradition.

In "Faith Healing" a detached yet interested persona describes a contemporary faith healing service. "Moustache" women "in flowered frocks" are pictured as being persuaded forward during such a service by the healer's gentle voice, "within whose warm spring rain loving care / each dwells some twenty seconds." The

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irony of this brief twenty seconds of compassion is sustained by the persona throughout as the healer, with his "deep, American voice," ask "Now, dear child, What's wrong" and directs "God about this eye, that knee." Some of the women are so affected by the healer's apparent concern and spiritual power that they linger and stay stiff, twitching and loud With deep hoarse tears, as if a kind of dumb And idiot child within them still survives To re-awake at kindness, thinking a voice At last calls them alone, that hands have come To lift and lighten.

In these convulsed, moaning, and pathetic women Larkin explores the desperate human need for love and affection, especially the way in which many of us tend to individualize a stranger's generalized affection, thinking it is intended for us alone. However, the poem creates a different kind of tension regarding the way the persona and the women respond to the healer's offer of a visionary moment. While the women freely embrace his touch, anxious to experience the sacramental power of his hands, the persona is suspicious, willing to see in their reactions nothing but a kind of wish fulfillment. That is, though the women find comfort in their emotional and physical exertions, the persona's skepticism suggests his sense that they are duped, used, and exploited.

For instance, when he shifts from description to meditation in the last stanza, he rhetorically echoes the healer's question "What's wrong?" His answer is "all's wrong." That is, he believes that what moves these women forward to the healer is not faith, neither theirs nor the healer's (they do not even appear to have physical infirmities that need correction), but instead what moves them and "What's wrong" is that "in everyone there sleeps / a sense of life lived according to love". He says that some people's lives gain meaning "by loving others" (these are few) while others (the many, like these moustache women) imagine "all they might have done had they been loved." If only they had been loved, they would have been well and not ripe for the healer's temporary solace. What's wrong, he goes on to intimate, is that no amount of faith, no touch from the healer, is enough to cure or heal that inner damage—a deep, lasting, and measureless awareness of life lived unloved: "That nothing cures." He believes that the sacramental impact of the healer's touch then is only momentary:

An immense slackening ache, As when, thawing, the rigid landscape weeps, Spreads slowly through them—that, and the voice above Saying Dear child, and all time has disproved.

The simile comparing the stiff, twitching women as they slump into their renewed life of pain (their "ache") to the weeping of the thawing "rigid landscape" is very effective in that it suggests both the coldness of a life lived without love and the fleeting nature of the healer's supposed personal affection. These women look for a sacramental, visionary moment in the healer, but, the persona suggests it is an illusory, fleeting one.

Consequently, Larkin's interest in faith healing has little to do with traditional Christian thought or practice; indeed, the poem seems almost to mock that tradition. Unlike "Church Going" where there was a real yearning to get behind the sacramental, the mysterious, the secret, in "Faith Healing" the persona can only describe what he sees. When he meditates on the sacramental meaning of the moment, he dismisses it as, at best, the desperate attempts of lonely women to experience human love, or, at worst, as a sham concocted to manipulate them. Yet his skepticism is not complete. In the poem Larkin captures the innate human need to look for love and compassion in others, even if the object of such hope is a religious con man.

In "Water" Larkin takes one of the most sacred motifs of traditional Christianity and speculates on how he would give a different sacramental meaning to water if he "were called in / To construct a religion." In this poem, then, his persona meditates on how he would change the meaning of this sacramental element. He says that "going to church / Would entail a fording / To dry, different clothes." Implicit in these lines are at least two Christian allusions. The first is the notion that all Christians must metaphorically ford the river of death. The most famous example of this fording occurs in John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*; there Christian comes to within sight of the Celestial City, but blocking him is a deep, bridgeless river. When he attempts to ford the river, his feeble faith wavers, and he starts to sink. However, he recalls the Scriptural promise from Isaiah xliii, 2: "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they will not overflow you." Accordingly, Christian, inspired by his recollection of Scripture and its attendant sacramental power, finds( D D D D ) E

Year "ground to stand upon" and is able to ford successfully the river.

The second allusion is to the sacrament of baptism. Larkin is recalling traditional Christianity's teaching that baptism is a necessary symbolic identification each believer must make with Christ: "Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore, we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, in order that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life" (Romans vi, 3-4). The meaning of baptism is in itself mysterious; Christians do not really die when they are baptized, but instead they die to the power of sin in their lives. This does not mean that they no longer sin, but that they are no longer slaves to sin. And baptism is not the start of this death to sin (it begins at the moment of spiritual conversion or regeneration), but rather a sign that this process of dying to sin has begun. Even for Christians this doctrine is mysterious (and divisive), so it is not surprising that Larkin attempts to invest it with new meaning; baptism is mysterious and as he seeks to understand it, he creates a new, personal interpretation of its meaning as a visionary moment.

For the persona in this poem water does not function as a metaphor either for death or for Christian baptism; one paradoxically fords the water "to dry, different clothes." It is not a symbol of how necessary it is for believers to be immersed in a faith requiring self-sacrifice and self-denial; rather, he says one must pass through water to attain a completely new and different physical condition. Perhaps his "dry, different clothes" are meant to contrast with the traditional Christian notion of a being washed clean by the blood of Christ's body. Yet water

in his new religion does have Biblical associations: "My liturgy would employ / Images of sousing, / A furious devout drench." Here there are echoes from the creation; the deluge of rain that led to the Great Flood; the parting of the Red Sea; John's baptism of Jesus (where the Word-the ultimate liturgy literally soused); Christ himself, the living well; and the river of the water of life in the final chapter of Revelation. His liturgical service would emphasize water primarily on the literal level as a vigorous cleansing agent; indeed, the violence suggested by the "furious, devout drench" resonates with the idea of water as an abrasive, eroding, blistering physical agent. In the concluding lines of his meditation, he tries to provide a hint of the new visionary moment water will produce in his religion:

And I should raise in the east A glass of water Where any-angled light Would congregate endlessly. These lines picture the high priest of this newly constructed religion as raising not the traditional communion cup of Eucharist (perhaps the most spiritually significant holiness image of traditional Christianity), but instead a glass of water that functions as a prism. Instead of the wine of Eucharist that represents on multiple levels the blood of Christ, including both its outpouring and its renewing power, the water of this new religion works as an affirming, refractory medium. As a prism, water might be expected to bend the light and produce the colors of the spectrum, but there is no mention of color in the poem, not even stained-glass. What congregates here is "anyangled light," endlessly; that is, though the new religion lacks the color and vibrancy of Christianity, it too is eternal, endless, offering a secular affirmation for living. Motion argues that the glass of water is "an imaginative" apprehension of endlessness, in which knowledge of time and its constraints, and of self and its shortcomings, is set aside" (78). Though as with "Church Going" the sacramental meaning of "Water" remains slightly beyond the persona's ability to express, it is certain that he approaches the visionary moment in this meditation.

The third poem from *The Whitsun Weddings* employing sacramental motifs is the title poem of the volume. Pentecost (from the Greek *pentekostos*, meaning fiftieth) celebrates in the Christian church the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles as recorded in Acts ii. Pentecost Sunday or Whitsunday (from the tradition of wearing white clothes on that day) is the seventh Sunday after Easter and in the Anglican church is observed by feasts; it is also a favorite day for baptism and joining the church. A more subtle allusion may be to the "wit" that the Holy Spirit bestows (knowledge and wisdom) to worshippers on that Sunday. Marriage, a sacrament in the Roman Catholic Church but not in the Anglican (and other Protestant churches), clearly carries with it sacramental associations in that a man and woman agree to set themselves apart for each other and no one else; it is a kind of holy pact between individuals sanctioned by the church. While for Larkin these particular sacramental associations may not have been important, in his poem he explores how marriage can be seen as both powerful and renewing.

In the poem a detached rail traveler begins by saying: That Whitsun, I was late getting away: Not till about One-twenty on the sunlit Saturday Did my threequarters-empty train pull out.

As he travels along he notices both the heat and the lovely landscape, at first unaware of the people: "At first, I didn't notice what a noise / The weddings made / Each station that we stopped at." Once aware, however, he takes careful interest in all of the people connected with the wedding parties. He meditates on the grinning girls with "pomaded" hair, "parodies of fashion," standing on the station platform; on fathers with "seamy foreheads;" on "mothers loud and fat;" and on "an uncle shouting smut." To this he notes the cheap and tawdry dress that marks off "the girls unreally from the rest."

Yet rather than adopt a skeptical view of these weddings, the traveler finds in them affirmation. He muses that for the fathers weddings are "huge and wholly farcical." While the women share "the secret like a happy funeral." The girls grip their handbags tighter and stare at a "religious wounding." Such expressions, according to Timms, "express the importance, even the sacredness, of marriage-days" (119). As his train rushes toward London, the traveler feels that the train is bringing in these newlyweds a redemptive, life giving power, and the visionary moment is realized: "And what it held / Stood ready to be loosed and with all the power / That being changed can give." In spite of his skepticism, he cannot help but see in these marriages power and renewal-power in the sense that human love which is the basis of marriage is implicit in these new brides and grooms and renewal in the sense that these fresh new wives and husbands may produce children and thus re-energize the population.

The poem ends with this visionary moment extended: 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.

Although the shower of arrows clearly has connections with Cupid's arrows and/or sexual climax, there is a subtle sacramental invocation of the descent of the Holy Spirit associated with Whitsunday, particularly as the life-giving image of rain waters the idea that these marriages may provide the basis for renewal in the great city. Larkin, as in "Church Going," uses sacramental resonances of marriage in "The Whitsun Weddings" to affirm human life by promoting "what is enduring rather than what is decaying" (117). Additionally, like "Church Going" this poem is more overt in its presentation of the possibility of visionary moment connected to a holiness motif.

## 4 III.

## 5 Conclusion

In *High Windows* two poems illustrate Larkin's use of holiness motifs, although skepticism appears to negate any visionary moment. As if to illustrate this, both poems utilize church-substitutes rather than churches. In "The

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Building" Larkin explores the role of a modern hospital as a church substitute. Barbara Everett notes that "the poem's undertones of allusion are so ecclesiastical or metaphysical that, even at the literal level, 'The Building' could almost as easily be a church as a hospital" (43). The poem opens with a very somber, sober persona who meditates deeply on death. As he thinks and observes patients in a hospital, he begins to use traditional holiness language. For instance, people come to the hospital "to confess that something has gone wrong." Others come "to join / The unseen congregations whose white rows / Lie set apart above." The great metaphysical question ("What happens to me when I die?") is every present in the minds of the patients, yet they labor to keep their fears below the surface of daily life, even in a hospital where such questions must often be honestly faced. As the patients await their own diagnosis, "their eyes / Go to each other, guessing." Though they wear a veneer of normalcy, they know that "past these doors are rooms, and rooms past those, / And more rooms yet, each one further off / And harder to return from." As they fight back their fears, they try to while a way the time reading torn magazines, drinking tea, or looking out the windows of this high-rise hospital. Ironically, from the windows of this hospital they can see "a locked church." However, unlike the locked church, the hospital is open to all; in fact, there is easy access: "All know they are going to die. / Not yet, perhaps not here, but in the end, / And somewhere like this." The poem ends with a subtle shift as the patients become parishioners seeking a visionary moment:

That is what it means This clean-sliced cliff; a struggle to transcend The thought of dying, for unless its power Outbuild cathedrals nothing contravenes The coming dark, though crowds each evening try With wasteful, weak, propitiatory flowers.

Unfortunately, these lines do not suggest that they find one. Instead, the hospital is a shabby, dreary, unsatisfactory substitute for a church. Words like "transcend", "cathedrals", and "propitiatory" are ironic makers; that is, they indicate that while there is a real need for the sacramental, for a visionary moment when facing death, what the hospital offers is not sufficient. Though perhaps more accessible than a church (after all the nearby church is locked), the hospital cannot "contravene the coming dark" of death, and the final lines intimate a pathetic, almost futile effort to oppose this coming darkness: "though crowds each evening try / With wasteful, weak, propitiatory flowers." As a church substitute, the hospital is inadequate, and, at the same time, the local church is shut. Yet Everett writes that "for all its realism, the poem grows towards and into something as little of time and place as any symbol is, a noble metaphysical construct built out of the present's concrete-and-glass" (44).

"High Windows" is filled with religious terminology and ideas, and is "about the way successive generations dispense with the taboos of their predecessors" (Timms 105). On the surface this meditation appears to substitute a sexual for a sacramental visionary moment. For example, the speaker is envious of the sexual freedom enjoyed by the younger generation:

When I see a couple of kind And guess he's fucking her and she's Taking pills or wearing a diaphragm, I know this is paradise Everyone old has dreamed of all their lives-His irony appears bitter as he notes that now eternal bliss no longer is reserved for the ( D D D D ) E Year faithful as a heavenly reward; instead, the sacramental image of paradise can be found in the here and now, in the heave and ho of sexual intercourse, in the momentary vision of sexual climax. Though for the speaker such a paradise is surely illusory, qualified, and ironic, the young strive to be free from sexual consequence since "she's / Taking pills or wearing a diaphragm." He goes on to say that the young can shirk off other responsibilities and duties as well: "Bonds and gestures [are] pushed to one side / Like an outdated combine harvester." For the young, modern life is simply a pursuit of immediate, sensual thrill; they go "down the long slide / To happiness, endlessly." Larkin's use of "the long slide," an allusion to the fall of man, undercuts this apparent paradise. And "endlessly" (reminiscent of "Water") is also intended ironically. It is not that the sexually liberated young find endless or eternal happiness through their sexual freedom; rather, it is that as each new generation of the young marches forward, their pursuit of freedom is an endless process.

The scramble by the young for sexual freedom and the corresponding envy of the old leads into the second part of the poem where the speaker reflects upon his own youth "forty years back." He notes that when he was young, the older generation thought about him as he does now about the younger generation, but with one crucial difference: forty years ago the older generation envied the freedom the young would have regarding religion: That'll be the life; No God any more, or sweating in the dark About hell and that, or having to die What you think of the priest. He And his lot will all go down the long slide Like free bloody birds.

Here the meditation clearly shifts to a deeper level and begins to focus squarely on the sacramental or perhaps one should say a desire to avoid the sacramental. He considers that his elders had been certain that he and the other youth of the day would escape from the burden of religion. God would be gone, an idea whose time had passed; fear of hell would vanish; hypocritical posturing toward the clergy would be unnecessary. The youth of forty years back, so the older generation thought then, would find freedom from religion and would "all go down the long slide" to happiness. Yet here too he is being ironic, for what did they actually slide to? Possibilities include death, ennui, and terminal cultural decadence, but none of these leads to happiness. The connection between the first two parts of the meditation is the ironic idea that happiness will come when various restraints upon human behavior are lifted. Forty years back when God "was alive," people wanted God to be gone so that they would not need to worry about his judgment (hell) nor his messengers (priests). In the speaker's immediate

## 5 CONCLUSION

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417 present, however, the young think that if only everyone could enjoy sexual freedom, then everyone would be  
418 happy.<sup>1</sup>

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