



# CRITICISM

VOLUME

187



# Poetry Criticism

*Criticism of the Works  
of the Most Significant and Widely  
Studied Poets of World Literature*

## Volume 187

*Lawrence J. Trudeau*  
Editor

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**P**oetry Criticism (PC) presents significant criticism of the world's greatest poets and provides supplementary biographical and bibliographical material to guide the interested reader to a greater understanding of the genre and its creators. This series was developed in response to suggestions from librarians serving high school, college, and public library patrons, who had noted a considerable number of requests for critical material on poems and poets. Although major poets and literary movements are covered in such Gale Literary Criticism series as *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)*, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism (TCLC)*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism (NCLC)*, *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800 (LC)*, and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism (CMLC)*, librarians perceived the need for a series devoted solely to poets and poetry.

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author and the critical debates surrounding his or her work.
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- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. All individual titles of poems, poetry collections, and theoretical works about poetry by the



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- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** describing each piece.
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Glen, Heather. "Blake's Criticism of Moral Thinking in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*." *Interpreting Blake*. Ed. Michael Phillips. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1978. 32-69. Rpt. in *Poetry Criticism*. Ed. Michelle Lee. Vol. 63. Detroit: Gale, 2005. 34-51. Print.

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# Contents

Preface vii

Acknowledgments xi

**Philip Larkin 1922-1985** ..... 1  
*Entry devoted to the poem "Church Going" (1955)*

**Petrarch 1304-1374** ..... 37  
*Italian poet, philosopher, and biographer*

Literary Criticism Series Cumulative Author Index 323

Literary Criticism Series Cumulative Topic Index 447

*PC* Cumulative Nationality Index 471

*PC-187* Title Index 475



# “Church Going”

## Philip Larkin

(Full name Philip Arthur Larkin) English poet, essayist, novelist, and critic.

The following entry provides criticism of Larkin’s poem “Church Going” (1955). For additional information about Larkin, see *PC*, Volumes 21 and 144.

### INTRODUCTION

Originally published in the collection *The Less Deceived* (1955), “Church Going” is considered to be among the most important works by English poet Philip Larkin (1922-1985). The poem, which documents an agnostic speaker’s thoughts during a casual visit to a church, reflects on the consequences of the loss of religion in the modern world. Critics have lauded Larkin’s subtle, masterful handling of tonal shifts that track the development of the narrator’s stance from smug skepticism, to confusion and irony, to a final acknowledgment of the meaningful role that churches play in the search for understanding and transcendence.

### SUBJECT AND FORM

Larkin wrote “Church Going” in 1954, while he was working as a sublibrarian at Queens University in Belfast, Northern Ireland. A bicycle enthusiast, he made frequent excursions to the surrounding area, often visiting churches along the way. The poem portrays one such visit. Composed in flexible verse with an *ababcdece* rhyme scheme, it is sixty-three lines long and comprises seven stanzas of nine lines each. Early in his career Larkin emulated the lyrical and transcendent poetry of William Butler Yeats, but the main influence on his mature work was the poetry of Thomas Hardy, who inspired him to write about real experiences and to communicate his feelings in a straightforward manner using ordinary language. “Church Going” exemplifies this approach.

The poem is a monolog spoken by a narrator who has stopped to see a church while on a bicycle tour. In the first stanza he circumspectly enters the building and begins to look around, identifying such standard objects as “matting, seats, and stone, / And little books,” cut flowers, and

“some brass and stuff / Up at the holy end.” Describing the silence of the church as “tense, musty, unignorable,” he takes off his bicycle clips—implying that in former times, it would more likely have been a hat—“in awkward reverence.” In the second stanza he runs his hand around the baptismal font, speculates about the condition of the building’s roof, mounts the lectern, and reads a few “hectoring” verses, whose “echoes snigger briefly.” Soon back at the church door, the narrator signs the visitors’ book, donates a coin, and concludes that the church “was not worth stopping for.” Nevertheless, he admits in stanza three that he often stops at churches, even though he is unsure about what to look for once he is inside.

In stanzas four and five he meditates on the future of churches, wondering what will happen to them when they have fallen “completely out of use.” Some cathedrals may serve as showpieces, he suggests, while others may be abandoned to grazing sheep, and still others may become sites for superstitious practices. “Power of some sort or other will go on,” the speaker asserts, but a time will come when even superstition and disbelief have ended. He hypothesizes that the last people “to seek / This place for what it was” will be antiquarians, or the “Christmas-addict,” or perhaps someone who is his own “representative” or descendant. In stanza six he imagines this figure will be “bored, uninformed,” and isolated, yet will still visit the site and associate it with considerations of marriage, birth, and death. Even though he is unable to understand the value of the stuffy building, the future visitor enjoys standing “in silence here.”

The tone of the poem undergoes a transformation in the final stanza as the speaker acknowledges that the church is “a serious house on serious earth.” Such houses will never become obsolete, he realizes, because “someone will forever be surprising / A hunger in himself to be more serious”—humans will always long for answers to questions about the significance of their lives, death, and what comes afterward. The narrator concludes that people will continue to gravitate toward churches—which they “once heard” are “proper to grow wise in”—and to perceive them as places fit for meditation, if for no other reason than that “so many dead” are buried in the surrounding cemeteries.

## MAJOR THEMES

In "Church Going," Larkin expresses what he perceived as a common predicament of the twentieth century: conscious of the fact that the sites, accoutrements, rituals, and symbols of traditional religion had lost their symbolic meaning, people nevertheless continued to seek the kind of psychological and spiritual comfort that they associated with belief. This theme is developed in the poem through Larkin's treatment of diction, imagery, and poetic persona.

Larkin uses simple language and modern jargon to identify the poem's speaker as a typical, contemporary person, although the extent of his experience with churches is unstated. His feelings of aimlessness and confusion about religion—he is "much at a loss" and "wondering what to look for"—are contrasted with his knowledgeable use of precise vocabulary such as font, lectern, parchment, pyx (a type of container for Communion hosts), and myrrh. The specificity of these objects reinforces their concreteness and the fact that in the modern world they have lost their sacred attributes. The speaker also follows such observances as taking off his bicycle clips, signing the visitors' book, and dropping a coin in the collection box. He is aware of the forms of churchgoing, Larkin suggests, but also of the fact that they do not provide him with any spiritual satisfaction. The poem's title may refer to the traditional practice of church attendance, to the speaker's haphazard visiting of churches as a recreational activity, or to the fact that the church, and religion itself, are going out of fashion in modern times.

Shifts in the speaker's tone emphasize the poem's ambiguities and paradoxes. Even though he is skeptical of what awaits him in yet "another church," he makes a point of stopping to visit it. Somewhat bored by its unremarkable features, he adopts a mocking tone and imagines possible future roles for the building—for "when churches fall completely out of use." Around the middle of the poem, in stanza four, however, the narrator starts to undermine his own flippancy as he ponders what will remain when even disbelief is no longer relevant. He begins to understand that churches are important because they help people create meaning in a meaningless world. The church is more compelling when he views it as a site for humans' compulsive examination of the purpose of their lives and their articulation of their need to be reassured about death. The poem's original lighthearted and even comic tone becomes solemn as the speaker guides the reader to contemplate serious issues.

The speaker's conclusions about the role of churches in people's lives respond to his own earlier questioning of

why he stopped there in the first place. In a final paradox he asserts that, although he himself is not a believer, he is confident that churches will endure because they are linked with people's "hunger" for gravity and meditation.

## CRITICAL RECEPTION

*The Less Deceived* received favorable reviews upon publication, with critics deeming it representative of Larkin's mature style. Larkin's notions about religion had been debated since the outset of his career, and reviewers recognized "Church Going" as his most sustained statement to date of his views on the subject. Reprinted in the *Speculator* soon after its publication, the poem reached a broad readership and was widely recognized as a masterpiece.

With its tone of honest self-scrutiny, skepticism, and residual longing for transcendence, "Church Going" came to be viewed as the definitive testimonial of British post-World War II attitudes toward religion. R. N. Parkinson (1971) declared it "the most important English poem of the nineteen fifties" because it acknowledges the experience of isolation and meaninglessness in the modern world while also offering an "affirmation of the need for faith and of the existence of faith under the most unexpected guises and circumstances." In "Church Going," Parkinson elaborated, Larkin systematically peels away the narrator's stock responses to doubt and atheism, leaving him with a new authenticity based on his tentative understanding of the human desire for meaning.

Several critics have considered "Church Going" in the context of *The Less Deceived*. David Timms (1973; see Further Reading) pointed out that the collection as a whole demonstrates Larkin's ability to convey strong emotions and to write sensitively and movingly about aspects of life important to modern readers. According to Timms, Larkin demonstrated in the book "that he was a witty poet with immense verbal facility, capable of the most subtle modulations of tone, speaking a language vitalised by its relationship with the idiom we speak." Those qualities, Timms noted, are evident in "Church Going," which is not about a church but about a particular individual undergoing an experience that shapes his thought process at a specific time in human history. A. Banerjee (2008) proposed that *The Less Deceived* embodies Larkin's own poetic principles in its use of accessible diction and its foundation in the details of real life in a specific time and place. The dry humor of "Church Going" engages the reader in the experience of the narrator; Banerjee observed, until Larkin jolts both the speaker and the reader into the sudden recognition

that despite the church's air of seeming obsolescence, it still stands for humankind's spiritual aspirations.

Scholars have also studied the concrete nature of Larkin's imagery. Christopher Hodgkins (2011) compared the descriptions of the church building in "Church Going" to similar imagery in poems by seventeenth-century poet George Herbert. Hodgkins contrasted Herbert's use of church imagery, which highlights the idea that the real church is within each person, with Larkin's, which hints at the notion of a modern "half-yearning towards lost unities and coherence." Andrew McKeown (2008) examined the paradox at the heart of "Church Going": that the speaker contemplates transcendence despite—as the enumeration of architectural and ecclesiastical features in the poem suggests—being trapped in mundane concerns. McKeown cited other poems by Larkin with themes similar to that of "Church Going," including "A Stone Church Damaged by a Bomb" (1943), in which the sound of church bells unexpectedly inspires a sense of awe in the narrator, and "The Building" (1974), in which the speaker's encounter with a disused, padlocked urban church prompts his thoughts about the role of churches in the modern world.

Jelena Krstovic

Academic Advisor: Robert C. Evans,  
Auburn University at Montgomery

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## PRINCIPAL WORKS

### Poetry

*The North Ship*. London: Fortune, 1945. Enl. ed. London: Faber and Faber, 1966. Print.

*XX Poems*. Belfast: Privately printed, 1951. Print.

*Philip Larkin*. Eynsham: Fantasy, 1954. Print.

\**The Less Deceived*. Hessele: Marvell, 1955. Print.

*The Whitsun Weddings*. London: Faber and Faber, 1964. Print.

†*High Windows*. London: Faber and Faber, 1974. Print.

"Aubade." *Times Literary Supplement* 23 Dec. 1977: 1491. Print.

*Aubade*. Salem: Seluzicki, 1980. Print.

‡*Collected Poems*. Ed. Anthony Thwaite. London: Faber and Faber, 1988. Print.

*Trouble at Willow Gables and Other Fictions*. Ed. James Booth. London: Faber and Faber, 2002. Print. (Essays, novella, poetry, short stories, and unfinished novels)

*Collected Poems*. Ed. Thwaite. Rev. ed. New York: Farrar, 2004. Print.

*The Complete Poems*. Ed. Archie Burnett. London: Faber and Faber, 2012. Print.

### Other Major Works

*Jill*. London: Fortune, 1946. Rev. ed. London: Faber and Faber, 1964. Print. (Novel)

*A Girl in Winter*. London: Faber and Faber, 1947. Print. (Novel)

*All What Jazz: A Record Diary, 1961-68*. London: Faber and Faber, 1970. Enl. ed. *All What Jazz: A Record Diary, 1961-1971*. London: Faber and Faber, 1985. Print. (Essays)

*The Oxford Book of Twentieth-Century English Verse*. Ed. Philip Larkin. Oxford: Clarendon P, 1973. Print. (Poetry)

*Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces, 1955-1982*. London: Faber and Faber, 1982. Print. (Essays)

*A Lifted Study-Storehouse: The Brynmor Jones Library, 1929-1979*. Hull: Hull UP, 1987. Print. (Nonfiction)

*Selected Letters of Philip Larkin: 1940-1985*. Ed. Thwaite. London: Faber and Faber, 1992. Print. (Letters)

*Further Requirements: Interviews, Broadcasts, Statements and Book Reviews, 1952-85*. Ed. Thwaite. London: Faber and Faber, 2001. Print. (Nonfiction)

*Letters to Monica*. Ed. Thwaite. London: Faber and Faber, 2010. Print. (Letters)

\*Includes "Church Going."

†Includes "The Building."

‡Includes "A Stone Church Damaged by a Bomb," composed in 1943.

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## CRITICISM

### R. N. Parkinson (essay date 1971)

SOURCE: Parkinson, R. N. "'To Keep Our Metaphysics Warm': A Study of *Church Going* by Philip Larkin." *Critical Survey* 5.3 (1971): 224-33. Print.

[In the following essay, Parkinson discusses the language and themes of "Church Going," arguing that it is a quintessential statement of mid-twentieth-century attitudes toward religion.]

## I

Why is *Church Going* the most important English poem of the nineteen fifties? Because, while it recognises man's seeming rootlessness, the predicament of isolation in a now hostile and meaningless world, it enables the reader to realise that the predicament is and has been a common one, and that there are other reactions possible to the intelligent and sensitive than despair. When John Press called it 'a study of Man as a creature isolated in a universe from which God seems to have withdrawn'<sup>1</sup> he was ignoring the religious and philosophical implications of this apparently quizzical, only half-serious poem. The message of the poem might be stated as follows: 'The ceremonies and forms of worship, the terminology of religion and philosophy, the objectifications of human ideals, hopes and fears may change, but the ideals themselves do not.' To make so bald a statement is, for the moment, to ignore other implications of the poem, to neglect the meaning embodied in the subtleties of its teaching and to forget that each line, each stanza, each word is full of that doubleness of suggestion which leads the reader, carefully and insidiously, into the position of the poet at the end, feeling in himself a 'hunger to be more serious' although he is unable to arrive at an intellectual formulation of what it is that he can be more serious about. But it is important to question such assertions as Mr. Press's, that, in his poetry, Philip Larkin 'accepts resignedly all the implications of his atheism.'<sup>2</sup>

## II

The whole tone of the poem expresses doubts about the validity of atheism either as a creed or as an attitude. The changing tone and attitudes of the personae of the poem constitute one of its greatest strengths; the changes show the poet peeling away stock attitudes from the surface of his character's mind until he really faces the underlying question by stating and implying as many meanings as he can of the concept of church on as many levels as possible, before coming to the final and not altogether welcome recognition that church used to embody man's sense of deeply felt needs and compulsions. The concluding stanza is acceptable because Larkin has examined so many other attitudes on the way and found them wanting: the defiantly ignorant, affected nevertheless by that heady silence which drives him to the careless use of the name of the God whom he ignores, in order to express his weak emotion; the tentatively ill-informed, pondering over the history of the building and the memories of Anglican worship which are stronger in himself than he wished to recognise—these attitudes are succeeded by the archaeological, the anthropological and the philosophical. None of the attitudes tells the real truth about church-going though each has its im-

portance in suggesting the enduring significance of those eternal truths and questions which church itself can only symbolise. The defiant and the quizzical attitudes give place to the serious in what seems to be a compellingly honest way. It is the modulation from bored scepticism to a recognition of metaphysical questions which gives the poem its permanent interest and calls for careful appraisal.

The connotations of the poem's title convey the unapprehended complication of the visitor's attitude—'church going' implies a regular and devout attendance at the services, together with support of the church's mission and function. Secondly it may suggest the mere good manners of well-meaning habit which at once keep the church going and prevent it from going altogether; only finally does it have the meaning given to it by the first stanza—the casual, bored dropping-in on buildings because they may have some historical interest for the uninformed passer-by, or because the visit will, at least for a few moments, mitigate the monotony of a meaningless existence. The first lines imply a hostile ignorance: 'Once I am sure there's nothing going on,' says that the visitor does not want to interrupt or to attend a service, but the fact that services are equated with 'goings on' conveys the visitor's ready scorn for superstitious observances, for a faith which is a social solecism, rather as though he equated faith in God with a disreputable landlady's carrying-on with a raffish lodger. At best, the goings on are the donning of clerical vestments whose symbolism is no longer understood.

When he does step inside, he 'lets the door thud shut' behind him with indifference and the very sound of the line makes him feel imprisoned. (Was religion a mental prison?) But this is just 'another church': from the context we gather that it will be meaningless to this modern church-goer who feels himself armed against the superstition of the past by a habitual failure to perceive the possibility of religious experience. What he finds are *things*, void of any meaning, spiritual, sacramental or ceremonial. The omission of the definite article from his list has a neutralising effect: 'matting, seats and stone and little books' are deprived of their normal functions—matting for comfort or for kneeling worshippers, pews for corporate worship or private meditation, carved gothic tracery declaring admiration for the variety of a divine universe, the Book of Common Prayer for lifting the imagination and feelings to spiritual aspiration—all these symbols are deliberately reduced to objects. The way in which the few remaining worshippers are failing is suggested by 'sprawlings of flowers,' no longer well arranged for praise in grace and order, 'cut for Sunday,' for perfunctory Sabbath observance which withers like the flowers during the week. The altar furniture, cloth, candlesticks and cross, have become



merely 'brass and stuff.' But the indifference of the observer has been only pretended, for he knows 'the holy end' and, without using the word, shows that he recognises the altar. The refusal to reveal all that he knows is deliberate. It is no accident that his kindest words are for 'the small neat organ' whose uses he can presumably acknowledge without losing face. He pretends to be one of those who goes 'As some to church repair, / Not for the doctrine, but the music there.'<sup>3</sup>

It is at this point, however, while denying that he has a mind or a soul to be mended, that his attitude of defiant ignorance is modified by the first conscious recognition of an atmosphere which emanates from, or accompanies, the material things: he hears and feels 'a tense, musty, unignorable silence.' The line is long-drawn-out by sibilants and caesuras to convey the tension of expectancy: he expects something of the church or of himself. The silence is 'unignorable.' There *is* something going on, or at least there has been, for there is evidence of a kind of intoxication in the verb 'brewed,' though it may be that the incense, like the other trace of religious inspiration, is as stale as a long-opened bottle of beer or as a long-stewed pot of tea. The almost meaningless formality of 'God knows how long' shows just how faint is the remaining odour of sanctity in the visitor's imagination, but something is there to provoke what follows—the wry, embarrassed sketch of a gesture of respect. Since he wears no hat, since he makes no ceremonial approach to church, all he can think of doing is to 'take off his cycle clips' in a near-comic motion, a rustic bob of 'awkward reverence.' If we are amused, we are amused at the contrast between the narrator's professions of indifference or hostility and his unwillingly acknowledged feelings. Perhaps we are amused at something very like superstition in our professed sceptic.

### III

The second stanza pursues this ambiguity of attitude by asking whether the church is only of antiquarian interest. In running his hand round the font, the visitor would seem to be assuring himself of the reality of material things, to be hoping to discover that it is of ancient date, and to be asking himself what it is *for*; but when he describes the roof in the borrowed language of a guide-book he hastily disavows any antiquarian pretensions, and turns to another form of mimicry. Mounting the lectern he reads a Bible lesson in what he takes to be appropriate tones. The attitude is, for a moment, reminiscent of the early Aldous Huxley: the bullying tone induced by the sight of the large-scale print in the official holy book recalls Gumbriel's ironic envy of the school chaplain 'standing in front of the spread brass eagle and fortified in his convictions by the

sixth chapter of Deuteronomy ... [speaking] ... with an enviable certainty. "Hear, O Israel," he was booming out over the top of the portentous Book: "the Lord our God is one Lord."'<sup>4</sup> Larkin's visitor seems also to be laughing at the simple-mindedness which can enjoy religious certainty, and yet to be envying its promise of security. But the modern visitor's burlesque of a clergyman's well-trained boom makes the visitor rather than the clergyman ridiculous, since he sounds to himself rather louder and ruder than he had meant to do. The church itself seems to criticise him for his ill-achieved intention: 'the echoes snigger briefly' and the satirist is reduced to the level of a small boy discovered in some ill-natured prank. He retreats from the scene of his crime (irreverence towards the symbols of immortality) and achieves what semblance of immortality is possible to him by singing the visitors' book. His own irony is turned back upon him as he flees the church's estimate of him and then *donates* an *Irish* sixpence—attempts to play upon the church the sort of trick he had judged it to be playing upon him: using inflated language to cover up its worthlessness. The Irish sixpence is as much of a fraud as, let us say, the forged Donation of Constantine. The place may not have been worth stopping for, but he is still shamed into making ritual gestures which are meant to assert his own worth and, in fact, show him to be acted upon by some ill-understood inner compulsion or habit of feeling.

### IV

The third stanza finds him asking what the nature of that compulsion is. He often stops at churches and comes out 'at a loss,' 'wondering what to look for.' In the context of the poem so far, he has felt that he should look for some vague historical or aesthetic interest. Here he is hesitating towards another objective. It may be too early in the poem to describe the object of his search as a faith, but he is asking what are the aims of his own wondering and wandering. Rather than pose the question in this form he pursues an apparently random speculation into the future, taking the complete decay of traditional worship for granted, and asks himself what we shall do with churches when they 'fall completely out of use.' His reflections profess to be entirely secular and ignore the use of the church in evangelising its members. Will churches have an interest as museums, he asks, and what musings will they then provoke? He implies that the musings will be historical only: cathedrals will be stone chronicles of a period of chronic illness in the psyche, lingering on into an age of atheism merely as an evidence of past superstition or of lost faith. 'Chronically on show' manages to suggest a defiant seediness accompanying the sense of a lost or fossilised function; and the very instruments of the

sacrament lie unused in locked cases for the new ignorant to pretend a curiosity about, so that they may be diverted momentarily from their own malaise by the amusements of a side-show—'Distracted from distraction by distraction.'<sup>5</sup> In such a climate of opinion the remaining churches may well fall into ruin, allowing rain and sheep (now the mere animals and not the flock of the faithful) to receive them back into the land, while, like the stone rows and circles of earlier faiths, they accumulate around them legend and lore which cause them to be shunned by the superstitious.

## V

At the symmetrical centre of the poem, the middle line of the middle stanza (the fourth) the poet makes his central assertion, a sort of affirmation of faith, 'Power of some sort or other will go on.' The statement is a warning as well as an affirmation. It says that vigour and activity will continue, like life itself, though the source of that vigour may still be unknown to us; and what we may use it for or what it may use us for, can only dimly be conceived. The line seems at first to re-echo the helpless secular tone of the earlier stanzas, but it may also give hints (as the most dispirited lines of the early Eliot did) of the reverse, in its one positive and dangerous noun. But the hints of vital powers, heavenly powers and power politics are dismissed in the succeeding lines so that the poet may picture the pagan superstitions which are to supersede the Christian ones. The new paganism will be curiously like the old: 'dubious women' (the adjective's sleazy connotations extend beyond the sexual to a fundamental doubt) doubting the power of any religious observances, doubtful of the efficacy of herbs or incantations or ritual, will yet use them in hope of practical results in health, healing or magical protection. Perhaps children will touch the 'particular stone' of the altar or of the font in unconscious tribute to its one-time use and significance, just as their predecessors attempted to use the magic of other superseded religions because they still recognised or hoped for the intervention of powers outside themselves, in human affairs. The games and riddles, the seemingly random influences of which the poem speaks, are the sort of substitute for the certainties of religion which had been noted by the creator of Madame Sosostriis, famous clairvoyante, and of Doris and Dusty, tellers of fortunes in cards, long before he wrote:

To communicate with Mars, converse with spirits

.....

Describe the sea monster . . . release omens

By sortilege, or tea leaves, riddle the inevitable

With playing cards, fiddle with pentagrams

Or barbituric acids, or dissect

The recurrent image into pre-conscious terrors—

To explore the womb, or tomb, or dreams; all these are usual

Pastimes and drugs and features of the press . . .<sup>6</sup>

All these are attempts to make sense of life, to enable man to understand his place in the universe or at least to help him to believe that he has one. It is becoming apparent, however, that these substitutes for explanation are as inadequate and unacceptable to Larkin as they had been to Eliot. Nevertheless, Larkin pursues his speculations to suggest that any form of positive conviction, whether it be superstition, belief or disbelief, will fade out of the future. All that remains of the past then will be another thing without meaning, an empty ruin, 'Grass, weedy pavement, brambles, buttress, sky.' These remnants will have little to attract the attention; there will be no-one to see them as 'Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang';<sup>7</sup> no buoyant or wistful recognition of beauty or of faith will haunt them.

## VI

At best, there may hang about the ruins memories of that partial, antiquarian knowledge which replaced faith and religious feeling—a knowledge which is itself dying out because it lacks any sense of purpose. Larkin is wryly humorous (wryness seems to be his constant attitude) at the expense of those last collectors of curiosities who will seek the building for what it was, with an intellectual recognition of its obscure original purpose. He affects scorn for the 'crew' who do in all seriousness what the visitor had done in ignorant imitation of them at the beginning of the poem—tap woodwork and stonework, jot down facts and impressions, in the full knowledge of their place in a long historical tradition which must look back to the dominance of the prime Christian symbol, the cross, over church and congregation. The use of the old-fashioned word 'rood' is an appropriate reminder of how distant from us is the meaning of the cross, and how far it is now from influencing the inner life of the knowledgeable. It is a part of Larkin's method, however, to reveal more knowledge and feeling in his vocabulary and cadence than does the surface attitude. The historian becomes a 'ruin-bibber' with the same addiction to his dry-as-dust researches as the bibulous has to alcohol. But memories of the Christian message live on in the sceptical visitor's comic compound nouns, for it was the Founder of Christianity who was originally accused of drunkenness and called (in the archaic language of the King James Version) a 'wine-bibber.' The antiquarian's lust for the antique is likened next to ardent if disreputable sexual desire and his love of ceremony or of history is said to produce such a fanatical devotion for the outward forms of Christmas

observance that he drinks them up like gin or sniffs them up like opium, although he has no personal experience of their inner meaning. The Biblical reference is renewed in the eighth line where he catches a whiff, not of incense, but of 'Gown-and-bands and organ pipes and myrrh.' The vocabulary and cadence are meant to recall the gifts of the Magi, gold and frankincense and myrrh, and so to show that the last antiquarian has indeed lost the substance of the Christmas message in the accidents of its presentation. By this time we know that the visitor is far more knowledgeable and sensitive than he at first admitted and that the pretence of boredom (with which he almost deceives himself) cannot entirely disguise his emotional and intellectual involvement with the history and purposes of the church. Whether the last visitor is to be the antiquarian, the ecclesiologist or a more humble being, he will have felt and inherited the effects of other people's faith and doubt. He will seem, like Browning's Bishop Blougram, to ask the reader 'And now what are we? unbelievers both?' Can it be that he would give an answer similar to Blougram's also: 'all that we've gained is, that belief / As unbelief before, shakes us by fits'?<sup>8</sup>

## VII

In stanza six the poet tries to define the sort of unbelief from which he suffers and in doing so he takes up from earlier stanzas the hint that reality is not to be found in the world of 'things.' As Eliot's thrush reminds us 'Human kind / Cannot bear very much reality.'<sup>9</sup> That ultimate reality which underlies human experience must always be expressed in terms of analogy and metaphor. The sixth stanza begins to show awareness of such reality. The poet's ordinary self, bored by churches because he is uninformed about them, is still drawn to ground where prayer has been valid. He may think that he knows that the 'ghostly silt' has been 'dispersed,' but his feelings tell him that it has not. Ghostly here, of course, means spiritual and holy, as it did in earlier centuries, and the word is not meant to be in the least evocative of the phantoms and spectres which may people a modern imagination. The silt is the accumulated dust of holy or religious men long held in suspension by the river of faith and now deposited, unvalued, in human consciousness. The word 'dispersed' is ambiguous: the dust may indeed be scattered but at the same time it may, like wind-dispersed seeds, grow again all the more widely by reason of that very dispersal. The words again contain a powerful metaphorical suggestion the very reverse of their surface meaning. As the poet's imagined successor and representative is drawn at some imaginary future time towards what is left of the church in which the poem opens—now a mere cross of ground—he is pulled by a magnetism as powerful as that which earlier drew the

dubious women, but he is different from the women because he can begin to understand what the power is. The encumbering 'suburb scrub,' with its associations of unsatisfactory urban life and untidy, useless, unattractive, stunted growth, cannot weaken the attraction to the repository of the fundamental mysteries inherent in 'marriage, and birth, and death and thoughts of these.' Such mysteries demand constant explanation and re-interpretation and the poet seems to acknowledge that the mysteries were once joined intelligibly together in the church but have since been sundered or split. He looks back to a time when the facts of existence, as the ordinary man perceives them, were held in balance ('equably') by faith and the observances of faith, and given transcendent significance in faith's own 'special shell.' As he says 'shell' he gives a hint of the living creature which once occupied the church and of the beauty of its home. The poet brings us back to the present and walls grow around the cross of ground once more as he acknowledges his identity with the visitor of the first stanza who contemplates this particular church, 'this accoutred frowsty barn,' with a kindly exasperation, feeling his involvement and yet feeling the counter impulse to deny it. A barn-like room is vast, cold, empty, windy, unfriendly but the word 'barn' also reduces the building to humble agricultural uses, recalls the harvest which should fill it and takes us back to the metaphorical uses of harvesting in the New Testament. 'Accoutred' reminds us of knights in armour and the out-of-dateness of a Christianity co-eval with them; 'frowsty' returns us to the musty, stuffy, ill-cared-for, slatternly, incense-laden atmosphere; and yet 'It pleases me to stand in silence here.'

## VIII

For this pleasure there is one good reason: there is permanent meaning in the temporalities of this material structure: 'A serious house on serious earth it is.' In the seventh and last stanza (seven is one of the Scriptural symbols of completeness) the house obliges us by its atmosphere and associations to be serious at last: it too exercises a sort of 'compulsion.' Here, finally, the poet tells us what we can be, what we must be, serious about. He affirms that there is reason and order in the universe. Bishop Blougram's reply to Gigadibs may again help us to see how our poet finds such uncertain certainty:

You own your instincts—why, what else do I,  
Who want, am made for, and must have a God  
Ere I can be aught, do aught.<sup>10</sup>

If we can no longer admit meaning to the name of God we still acknowledge the gods of our own compulsions. The poet recognises that the Christian church had long since come to grips with these compulsions in its own way; that