Journeying in Time and Space "through the tall heat that slept": Larkin's "The Whitsun Weddings"

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Abstract:
This paper examines Philip Larkin's use of the metaphor of a train journey in his famous poem "The Whitsun Weddings" to transform time into space in such a way so as to enable the speaker to present a geographical and historical survey of the rural, urban and industrial landscape of mid-twentieth-century, post-war England, registering the social and cultural changes brought about by the process of modernization. The paper argues that the train journey functions as a metaphor for an imaginative journey, through time and space, that brings, in a characteristically discursive manner, Larkin's solitary and contemplative speaker from a state of detachment and superiority to one of heightened and thoughtful realization of the deeper implications of his perceptions as the train, and the poem near the final destination. In other words, the railway journey through the spatial and temporal metaphor of "the tall heat that slept" becomes a means of revealing and patterning the speaker's changing responses to the modern English landscape and English people.

Keywords: *Philip Larkin, "The Whitsun Weddings," spatiality, temporality, train journey as metaphor*

I am concerned in this paper with some of the distinctive terms and major concerns of Philip Larkin's art as they are manifested in his poem "The Whitsun Weddings," what one of his critics, James Booth, calls his "poetic condition, his own unique manner of being as a poet" (3). I argue that in his poetry Larkin wants to understand time, "the lengths and breadths of time" (*The Complete Poems* 72) as he expresses it, in spatial imagery, in his "An Arundel Tomb," so as to make sense of the world and experience. He wants to understand how time and what we experience in time change us, and also what survives experience, what remains of it. He said:

> I write poems to preserve things I have seen/ thought/ felt (if I may so indicate a composite and complex experience) both for myself and for others, though I feel that my prime responsibility is to the experience itself, which I am trying to keep from oblivion for its own sake. Why I should do this I have no idea, but I think the impulse to preserve lies at the bottom of all art. (*Required Writing* 79)

Larkin explores his own place in this world, hence he engages with questions of identity, selfhood and otherness. The question of how to perceive, how to judge, how to come to terms with experience and how to preserve it, is a characteristic concern of his poetry. A statement the speaker of "The Whitsun Weddings" makes

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in the fourth verse testifies to this concern: "Struck, I leant / More promptly out next time, more curiously, / And saw it all again in different terms" (*The Complete Poems* 57). This desire to see and to understand is revealed through a discursive development that takes the form of an imaginative journey for his speakers. One way of making sense of the world and experience and expressing it in Larkin's poetry is, as István D. Rácz notes, to transform time into space, and the central device for this transformation is the train journey, in several poems such as "I Remember, I Remember," "The Whitsun Weddings," "Here" and "Dockery and Son" (120). These are poems that tell a story, the story of a journey, literally and metaphorically. Therefore, it is possible to see "The Whitsun Weddings" as a form of narrative discourse, which, as such, contains what Robert T. Tally Jr. regards in his "Mapping Narratives" as a characteristic element of all narratives, namely, a "tension between narration and description… the struggle between advancing the plot and satisfactorily sketching the scene…" since, as Tally observes, in order to tell a story, "all narratives must mobilize and organize spaces" which are, in fact, "necessarily embedded with narratives" (2). Tally contends that a fundamental aspect of a story is the "spatiotemporal context in which it makes sense" (3). I believe that an exploration of how this context functions can yield insightful perspectives on reading Larkin's poem, "The Whitsun Weddings," that presents a narrative of the poet-speaker's encounter, quite by chance, with a number of couples who have just got married, on one of the train journeys he made from Hull, in the north of England, to London.

A remark Larkin made in an interview he gave to *Paris Review* in 1982, where he said he wrote "using words and syntax in the normal way to describe recognisable experiences as memorably as possible" (*Required Writing* 75) contains valuable and illuminating hints in terms of his approach to, and treatment of, experience. The experiences he wrote about are recognisable not only in the sense that they have elements of universal and timeless human experiences but also in the sense that they are firmly rooted in the particular place and the particular historical moment in which they were written, and thus portray a recognisable world, the world of mid-twentieth century, post-war England. It is this quality that makes his work widely popular and also accessible. Yet his poetry is in fact much more complex than his statement seems to suggest. As Rácz remarks, Larkin is a poet "whose poems are particularly easy and extremely difficult to read" and "his verse is read and enjoyed by a relatively wide non-academic reading public. The poet himself largely contributed to the myth of this "easiness" by overstressing the simplicity of his texts in his interviews and declarations" (119). However, as Rácz warns, "this notion of accessibility should not blind us to the complexity of his poetry" (119). Larkin does not present a photographic copy of the world in his poems. He himself said, "As a guiding principle I believe that every poem must be its sole freshly created universe" (*Required Writing* 79). What makes many of his poems complex and ambiguous is

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the way he presents this recognizable world, the changing post-war England, and explores a complex set of responses and attitudes to it. It is the plurality of interpretations and attitudes, and the absence of any final resolution between them, that make his poems challenging and highly ambiguous. A sense of uncertainty and mystery seems to be a characteristic aspect of much of his work. As Stephen Regan puts it in his essay, "Philip Larkin: A Late Modern Poet," a trajectory found in Larkin's poetry, that is, "an opening out from the securely known into the utterly unfathomable" becomes a "hallmark of his work, giving a complex charge to many of his poems" including "The Whitsun Weddings" (147).

Larkin's remark about his "words and syntax [used] in the normal way" refers to the conventional forms of his poems, conventional in the sense that Larkin makes use of traditional verse forms and follows a discursive, argumentative development that finally arrives at a conclusion, although this conclusion in his poetry is very often ambiguous due to an unresolved tension between acceptance of, or resignation to, the conditions of the world in which he finds himself, and a longing for transcendence. The conventional forms are familiar, and hence, one way of rendering the experiences recognizable. His language is, to a great extent, ordinary, colloquial and familiar. As Andrew Swarbrick observes in relation to the volume that contains "The Whitsun Weddings" as the title poem, "His use of stereotypes, of clichés, of the recognizable idioms and registers of particular voices, creates the representativeness of so many poems in *The Whitsun Weddings*" (121). In other words, "[b]y trading on the familiar, Larkin can seem to speak for the common man" (Swarbrick 121). However, as Swarbrick notes, "it is always at one remove and Larkin is always the voyeur, observing from behind the window of his railway carriage" (121). The poems do not simplify these recognizable experiences; instead, they lead to an emotionally powerful consciousness of a meaning and significance that is almost beyond expression and beyond reach. "On the private edge of elsewhere / somewhere / nowhere, (the poems) suddenly pitch themselves higher" (Swarbrick 121). This discursive development is expressed and enacted, as it were, through the structure and language of the poems.

"The Whitsun Weddings" is one of Larkin's best-known poems. R. P. Draper regards it as one of the poems "on which his permanent reputation is likely to rest" (231). The poem was written between the summer of 1957 and October 1958 (Swarbrick 105). It is in the form of a dramatic monologue that characteristically features a speaker, a poetic persona, who discursively reaches a state of awareness. On the other hand, "The Whitsun Weddings" is different from many of Larkin's poems in that it creates at the end a note of celebration and hope, and suggests the possibility of affirmation.

The train journey in the poem is used as a means of structuring the changing perceptions of the speaker. Larkin's controlled use of the metaphor of the train journey largely determines how the poem progresses. The spatiotemporal context is

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established through this metaphor which patterns what is told and also acts as a trope that deepens the speaker's meditations. The speaker's gradual involvement in his environment as the train moves, and what he notices and how, create the impression that the view from the train window is a means of reaching into the past of England as well as providing a survey of the contemporary scene. Once the human element becomes the focus of the speaker's observations, the spatial dimension of the journey gains further significance as a place with a narrative and a meaning.

The journey takes place on a sunny and warm Saturday on the Whitsun weekend. The poem begins with a vivid sense of time and place:

> That Whitsun, I was late getting away:
> Not till about
> One-twenty on the sunlit Saturday
> Did my three-quarters empty train pull out,
> All windows down, all cushions hot, all sense
> Of being in a hurry gone. (*The Complete Poems* 56)

The narrative element, the telling of a story worth telling is apparent at the very beginning of the poem: "That Whitsun, I…". It is not just any weekend, but a particular, memorable one that the poet-speaker remembers and is going to tell us about. As David Lodge has pointed out, the opening stanza has a "characteristically casual, colloquial tone, and the near-redundant specificity […] of a personal anecdote" (217). The description of the compartment evokes a sense of what it feels like to be there. The repetition of "all, all, all" puts emphasis on the sense of lethargy. In the same stanza the train is described running "Behind the backs of houses, crossed a street / Of blinding windscreens, smelt the fish-dock; thence / The river's level drifting breadth began, / Where sky and Lincolnshire and water meet" (*The Complete Poems* 56). In these lines, the reader is made to feel the impact of what the speaker sees and smells. Actually, it is the heat of the afternoon that produces a sensual experience. In the second stanza of the poem the speaker gives a description of the entire journey: "All afternoon, through the tall heat that slept / For miles inland, / A slow and stopping curve southwards we kept" (*The Complete Poems* 56-57), creating an image of the spirit of a seamless landscape in which "the tall heat" stands, suggesting its passivity, timelessness and silence in a trope that belongs both to time and space. The image forms the context for the entire journey and for the silent meditations of the speaker. A relaxed atmosphere is built up, one very well suited to the mood of the speaker who is glad "to get away," probably from work, and to have an opportunity to enjoy his solitude. As Booth observes, this relaxed atmosphere is achieved by "the suspension of time" (149). The poem, Booth says, short-circuits "the metaphor, 'a space of time,' by losing time in place" (149-150). It is mainly the metaphor of the train journey "through the tall heat that slept" that suspends time and

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provides Larkin with a panoramic mode that enables him to structure and represent the temporality of his narrative through space and spatial form. It is a metaphor based upon an image that makes available to the speaker a wide view which makes room for shifts in perspective and attitude. As the train moves through this "sleeping" heat of the English landscape, a sense of motion is also created. In fact, this kinaesthetic sense subtly underlies the entire poem, implying the dynamic nature of the narrative. The journey allows the speaker to see England in such a way that "sequence becomes simultaneity, so that all of England feels to be on view, and the different glimpses are blended in the solvent of Larkin's observant eye" (Lucas 202). The wide perspective becomes apparent in the details of the landscape that the speaker notices:

> Wide farms went by, short-shadowed cattle, and
> Canals with floatings of industrial froth;
> A hothouse flashed uniquely: hedges dipped
> And rose: and now and then a smell of grass
> Displaced the reek of buttoned carriage cloth
> Until the next town, new and nondescript,
> Approached with acres of dismantled cars. (*The Complete Poems* 57)

In these lines, the poem's pace and the speaker's observations enact the movements of the train and the train itself turns into a space in which to experience the passing of time, literally during the travel, and also travelling through the English landscape in terms of the changes the speaker's observing eye records, producing a sense of what has gone before. The speaker's descriptions of what he sees are a means of conveying the feeling of surveying a wide landscape, in other words the rural, urban and industrial England that carry the visible signs of a long history. Features of the landscape that the speaker notices in passing become emblems of certain events and changes such as post-war rebuilding, economic growth, and a consumer society, implied in "the next town, new and non-descript" and the "acres of dismantled cars." In fact, the entire poem is informed by the speaker's consciousness of the changing ways and values of the post-war provincial English society. This is the mid-twentieth century, a moment of change after the difficult war years. As Stephen Regan observes in *Philip Larkin*, in the late 1950s the social and economic circumstances of post-war Britain had altered significantly. New employment opportunities were created and credit was available for the purchase of consumer goods (100-101). In a later comment, in his essay "Philip Larkin: a late modern poet," Regan describes Larkin's poetry as "socially responsive," a quality that he sees as an influence of the poets of the 1930s, specifically of Auden and MacNeice (149). Another critic, John Lucas, remarks that Larkin "can often look like a tourist travelling through England" (198), underlining the care with which he views and presents his environment. It is important to note, however, that the literal description in "The Whitsun Weddings"

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is not made up of casual details, of merely what the speaker happens to see. He pays attention to these details for they are part of the narrative of his imaginative journey. This is what makes them "unique," as the hothouse flashes "uniquely." In other words, the scenery from the train window is not undifferentiated; instead, it is a record, experienced through his senses, of his shifting response and attitude to his world. The "reek" of carriage-cloth, the "non-descript" new town, the "dismantled" cars are, obviously, details that are meant to show his critique of the modern world, and the reflective quality of his individual response.

It is not until the third stanza that the speaker realizes that newly-wed couples are boarding the train at the stations where it stops. He says he had mistaken the sounds of the wedding parties, that is, the newly-weds and the guests gathered to see them off as they get ready to start on their honeymoons after the weddings, for what he supposed to be the noises made by the porters at the stations: "At first, I didn't notice what a noise / The weddings made / Each station that we stopped at […] / And went on reading" (*The Complete Poems* 57). The fact that he has been reading characterises the speaker's attitude as largely indifferent to the people on the platforms and the noise they made. He is withdrawn and uninterested in what is happening outside. Yet once the train starts again, he begins to notice them. His ability to observe is not limited to the surrounding landscape, it extends to the people living there and he reveals himself as a "fastidious observer of the human scene" (Lucas 202):

> We passed 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 Complete Poems* 57)

The noise made by the people attracts the speaker's attention, and the silent landscape through which he has been travelling becomes humanized. He begins to realize that the people who board the train at the stations where it stops are newly-married couples going on their honeymoon after the wedding ceremonies are over, and the people on the platforms are their friends and families. The guests are waving goodbye to the departing couples, as if to "something that survived" the weddings. The speaker begins to feel the sense of departing, and tries to imagine what the event means to them. What survives is the change that marriage will make in the lives of the couples, the event is important as the beginning of a new life, which they will

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experience together. The train journey thus achieves symbolic value, specifically for the newly-weds, as representing their journey through life as husband and wife. His gaze is directed, with growing interest and attention, towards these people:

> The fathers with broad belts under their suits
> And seamy foreheads; mothers loud and fat;
> An uncle shouting smut; and then the perms,
> The nylon gloves and jewellery substitutes,
> The lemons, mauves, and olive-ochres […] (*The Complete Poems* 57)

The speaker's observations include details of physical appearance, articles of clothing, and behaviour. His response to these people is not entirely neutral, or approving. Mocking expressions such as "parodies of fashion," references to "nylon gloves" and "jewellery substitutes" are signs of class consciousness and the social and cultural distance between the speaker and the people he is watching. The selected local details while describing the wedding parties evoke a particular time and culture, and a particular social class. They offer "a medley of recognizable social types and postures" (Booth 145). The speaker does not stop observing, however; he begins to imagine how the guests cheering the couples feel and what they must be thinking. In other words, his interest and awareness begin to deepen. This new stage in his imaginative journey is made manifest in the affirmative declaration, "Yes, from cafes / And banquet-halls up yards, and bunting-dressed / Coach-party annexes, the wedding-days / Were coming to an end" (*The Complete Poems* 57). He continues to observe the guests, more sympathetically and seriously:

> And, as we moved, each face seemed to define
> Just what it saw departing: children frowned
> At something dull; fathers had never known
>
> Success so huge and wholly farcical;
> The women shared
> The secret like a happy funeral;
> While girls, gripping their handbags tighter, stared
> At a religious wounding. (*The Complete Poems* 57-58)

Describing the weddings as a "happy funeral" and "a religious wounding" acquires a particular relevance when regarded in terms of the occasion for the speaker's encounter with the wedding parties. As the title indicates, it is Whitsun, "a Christian festival beginning the seventh Sunday after Easter" (Burnett 413), a religious holiday celebrating, in the words of Regan in *Philip Larkin*, "ideals of unity and coherence" (118), that provides this opportunity. In his discussion of the "ritualistic associations"

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(118) of the title of the poem, Stephen Regan draws attention to the mythical dimension that is evident in Larkin's recognition that weddings are moments of painful loss and separation as well as celebration of a happy event (118). The speaker is also commenting on the place and role of such rituals in modern society, how they have come to be regarded in a social and secular, rather than a religious context. The reason why so many people chose to get married on the Whitsun weekend was that "the British tax laws in the 1950s granted a married man's tax allowance for the previous year to couples who got married by the Whit deadline" (Burnett 413). The speaker's growing imaginative interest is, in fact, an outcome of his realization of the importance of these events as communal activities offering the possibility of communal integration and a shared understanding that could go beyond social and cultural divisions in modern society. Once the couples are all inside the compartment, "the three-quarters-empty train," as it was described at the beginning of the journey, becomes "loaded with the sum of all they saw" (*The Complete Poems* 58). This metaphorical "load," implying their feeling of leaving their former way of life behind and starting a new life as married couples, is connected to, and thus reinforces, the symbolic quality of the train journey as a metaphorical journey to the future. The speaker notices how "they watched the landscape, sitting side by side" (*The Complete Poems* 58). He watches the landscape as well, in a way that blends what is seen from the window with his fellow travellers: "– An Odeon went past, a cooling tower, / And someone running up to bowl – and none / Thought of the others they would never meet / Or how their lives would all contain this hour" (*The Complete Poems* 58). Because the speaker has been led by his imaginative involvement with their experience to reflect on what he thinks they must be feeling at this important moment in their lives, his mood and tone have changed into a solemnity strikingly different from his earlier reflections. As his attitude shifts, the people also begin to appear as worthy of his attention and contemplation, not as targets of mockery. He is led by his increasing interest and responsiveness to imagine their future, "how their lives would all contain this hour," emphasizing the special meaning of the hour, a meaning of which he believes they are unaware because they are preoccupied, or "loaded," with thoughts of their future. The speaker's imagination then extends to include an image of the capital, London, the destination of the train and all the passengers on it: "I thought of London spread out in the sun, / Its postal districts packed like squares of wheat: / There we were aimed" (*The Complete Poems* 58). The image of London "spread out" joins the rural "wheat" with the official and bureaucratic "postal districts," and creates another image of the urban pastoral, suggesting the long history of the metropolis. In Lucas's opinion, this image "marvellously turns London into the pastoral world of natural riches which earlier poets had identified in opposition of the city, and very often to people" (203). As the train approaches London, racing across "Bright knots of rail," the speaker has a sense of reaching the end of a special experience: "[…] and it was nearly done, this frail /

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Travelling coincidence; and what it held / Stood ready to be loosed with all the power / That being changed can give" (*The Complete Poems* 58). By describing the encounter with the newly-married couples as a "frail travelling coincidence," the speaker is expressing a sense of regret and sadness that it is over. What the coincidence held is the "sum of all they saw," that the compartment was "loaded" with. It is now "ready to be loosed", as the journey finally comes to an end and the couples begin their new lives in their new identity. The coincidence holds an intense imaginative experience for the speaker as well. The complexity of this experience lies in the tension between the acceptance of the contingency of modern life, and the struggle and desire to overcome it by means of achieving some kind of solidarity with others. The final image with which the speaker ends his narrative renders his recognition of this complexity: "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 Complete Poems* 58). What follows the movements of the brakes as the train comes to a stop is a paradoxically "swelled" sense of falling like an arrow-shower, which, at the very end, in the last line, is transformed into another shower, a fall of rain, implying fertility, regeneration, yet in another context sadness and disappointment for the couples. The poem has moved through the gradually increasing awareness and responsiveness of the speaker to a stage where it "makes a metaphorical leap into the visionary unknown" (Draper 233). According to Lucas, the vision with which Larkin ends "The Whitsun Weddings" "supplies the right hint of further harvests, further riches" (203). Yet, the speaker's reference to "somewhere" serves to indicate that the potential of an affirmative conclusion can only be realized somewhere "out of sight," in other words "out of reach," as the speaker of "Here," another poem in the same volume, declares in the last lines, for the possibility of an "unfenced existence" (*The Complete Poems* 49). "We slowed again, and as the tightened brakes took hold" coincides with the intensified realization of the speaker as to the possible implications of the event, the exact nature and location of which cannot be known or expressed except by a reference to "somewhere" that is "out of sight." "Somewhere" is apparently an imaginary place and since it is "out of sight" it cannot be securely known.

As Draper argues, "Larkin exploits the sequential nature of traditional syntax, driving through to an emotionally powerful climax" (235). The temporal progress is transformed into space and spatial relations as the speaker's observing eye blends what he sees out of the train window with what he sees in the train compartment, resulting in a heightened understanding of their implications. In this way, the sequence of spatiotemporal contiguities in "The Whitsun Weddings" in their entirety acquire the status of a metaphor of the whole experience. Larkin's close attention to literal details of social observation is, in James Booth's view, "a discipline designed to generate the purest metaphorical intensity" (148). To put it in different terms, the details of the landscape that the speaker of the poem takes notice of are not social

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documentary or realistic portrayal as opposed to metaphorical representation, since they become the metaphor itself. As Lucas comments, "this is neither a picturesque nor a blighted landscape. It has value and meaning conferred on it by the fact that the lovers on the train come from it and will return to it" (203). The speaker sees the marriages in the context of "the details glimpsed from the train-windows, so that the scenes beyond the windows and those within blend together to form the emblematic image of a society" (Lucas 203), the provincial English society. The landscape constructed through the literal details the speaker has noted, gains meaning as a place where these people live. The poem as well as its speaker reach a point of profound awareness, as the speaker directs his gaze on to the couples in the compartment, of the fact that these people inhabit the landscape, and the fleeting images from the train window are part of their lives. The landscape becomes actually a place where these people have their homes. The factual details of the landscape thus serve as metaphors of the imaginative journey. Throughout the poem, poetic devices such as run-on lines and run-on stanzas, regular rhyme pattern, and toward the end of the poem the onomatopoeia achieved by the repetition of the consonants "r," "s" and "t" create rhythm, enacting the train's movements as well as the movement, as it were, of the speaker's consciousness and imagination which endow what he sees both outside and inside the train with a particular meaning. Phrases and words such as "as if" and the repeated "seem" and "something" function as signs of the speaker's mental activity as he tries to understand the people he has been watching, and attributes certain meanings to his observations of their behaviour, manner and expressions.

In conclusion, it is the speaker's search and longing for a unifying vision that leads to his attempts to find meaning and significance in this experience which by sheer coincidence he has come to share with people he will probably never see again. The fact that he feels they are unaware of this significance is a sign of his sense of isolation from them, which is the inevitable price he must pay for the privilege of being a perceptive and imaginative onlooker. His active imagination helps him to better understand these people and thus helps to shorten the distance between himself and them. On the other hand, however, his ability to see more than they can prevents him from identifying with them. He knows that "one's own perceptions can separate one from, as well as connect one with, someone else's experience" (Bowen 92). The ending of the poem demonstrates another aspect of the speaker's perceptions, that is, their boundaries and limits. In the last line, the relative confidence of his earlier comments is replaced by an emphasis on the difficulty of knowing with certainty. Nevertheless, the "frail coincidence" has enabled him to catch a glimpse of the newly-wed couples' lives and a part of their experience, by virtue of sharing a journey with them "through the tall heat that slept." Although it is only a glimpse and he will never find out what happens after "this hour," the experience and "what it held" have been made "recognizable" and "memorable" in the poem.

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