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**Published paper**

Piette, A.C. (2013) *Childhood Wiped Out: Larkin, His Father, and the Bombing of Coventry*. English, 62 (238). 230 - 247. ISSN 0013-8215

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/english/eft030>

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**Childhood Wiped Out:  
Larkin, his Father and the Bombing of Coventry**

Adam Piette

Something to do with violence

A long way back

('Love Again')

On 14 November 1940, 30,000 incendiaries (in 881 canisters) and 1200-1600 bombs containing 503 tons of high explosive fell on Coventry, killing 663, injuring 1256 (863 seriously), completely destroying two thirds of the medieval city centre, and liberally plastering the rest of the city, putting over a third of the factories out of action. Tom Harrison, the founder of Mass Observation, turned up to report for the BBC on the psychological damage done to the people:

The small size of the place makes people feel that the only thing they can do is *get out of it altogether*. The dislocation is so total in the town that people feel that *the town is killed*. 'Coventry is finished' and 'Coventry is dead' were the key phrases of Friday's talk.<sup>1</sup>

A fourteen-year-old girl, evacuated from the Coventry and Warwickshire Hospital the morning of the 15th, told Norman Longmate, in his book on the raid:

As the days went by with no words of my parents I began to think they were all dead. After about a week one afternoon I looked up the ward and saw dad coming through the door.... He told me he had walked to Coventry to find me but no one knew anything about us. On the way he had met the mass funeral of people killed. He had stood and watched not knowing if I was one of them. But by chance someone had told him a few of us had been taken to Stratford and as a last resort he had gone there.... It was very strange later to find I had been presumed dead and to see my own name on the mortuary list outside the Council House. (Longmate, 228)

Coventry was Larkin's home town, the city his father was treasurer for,<sup>2</sup> the site and location of his mysteriously blank childhood. This paper will be looking at the ways the Coventry blitz wiped out Larkin's childhood, erasing the traces of his pre-war biography, to be replaced by a deliberately questionable fiction of a life with dead parents, a child self presumed dead, and a home town a mass grave for forbidden desires and an unacknowledged father.

Two important speculations cast light on Larkin's work in the 1940s. The first is Andrew Motion's surmise concerning the experiences underwriting

Larkin's xenophobia – Motion argues that it developed as a result of the two trips to Germany he made with his Nazi-sympathising father to Königswinter and Wernigerode (summer 1936) and Kreuznach in 1937:

We have to wonder how disturbed Larkin felt being in Germany during the late 1930s with someone of his father's extreme political views. He said nothing of how his friends reacted when he returned home; he is silent about his father's reputation in Coventry; he makes no attempt to understand his unhappiness as a disguised or displaced sense of shame. Yet to a degree that is what it was.<sup>3</sup>

As Motion points out, Larkin practically admitted this in the Miriam Goss *Observer* interview: 'My father was keen on Germany for some reason: he'd gone there to study their office methods and fallen in love with the place. And he took us there twice; I think this sowed the seeds of my hatred for abroad – not being able to talk to anyone, or read anything'.<sup>4</sup> Larkin evasively implies that his father's love of Germany was romantic tourism and that the seeds of his own hatred of abroad were confined to difficulty of communication. Motion suggests that the difficulty might lie elsewhere, displaced and disguised within these evasions: the difficulty of acknowledging his father's politics ('He said nothing ...', 'he is silent about ...').<sup>5</sup>

The second speculation is Larkin's, in the guise of Kemp in *Jill*, reflecting on his own reactions to the bombing of Coventry, Thursday 14 November 1940.

Larkin had gone to Coventry on the following Saturday to look for his parents. He found the family home intact, but no sign of them. It was only when he got back to Oxford that he learned that his parents were safe and sound. This means that for that whole day, Larkin was contemplating the possibility of their death. In the novel, Kemp is alone, hopes desperately his parents are alive, acknowledging his dependence on them. Unlike Larkin, Kemp receives the news of their safety whilst in the city. On the train back to Oxford, he registers the shock of the ruins he has witnessed:

he saw once again the scarecrow buildings, the streets half heaved-up by detonations, the candlelit bar. It no longer seemed meaningless: struggling awake again, rubbing his eyes with chilled hands, he thought it represented the end of his use for the place. It meant no more to him now, and so it was destroyed: it seemed symbolic, a kind of annulling of his childhood. The thought excited him. It was if he had been told: all the past is cancelled: all the suffering connected with that town, all your childhood, is wiped out. Now there is a fresh start for you: you are no longer governed by what has gone before.<sup>6</sup>

This fresh start is cruelly ironized in the remainder of the novel. The freedom from his past catapults Kemp into maddened, frenzied panic at the relativity of all moral choices, dark and dangerous sexual fantasy and delirious dependence on the charity of his parents.<sup>7</sup>

Larkin is here 'confessing' to a psychological need to fictionalize his relationship to Coventry after the Blitz. Kemp admits that the bombing of Coventry has become 'symbolic' for him, representing an opportunity to annul his past. The suffering 'connected with that town' is sourced in some family drama, since what the bombing has done is, again 'symbolically', kill off his parents and wipe out his childhood. Kemp discovers an existential energy in the symbolic death of his parents, an energy which importantly takes the form of the fictionalizing power of an impersonal narrative voice: 'It was as if he had been told [...] Now there is a fresh start for you.' The shift from the 'I' to the 'he' of the third person narrative we are reading is given a history. Kemp can novelize his own experiences once his real parents are 'symbolically' wiped out, enabling a biography-free third person voice to emerge, The use of 'symbolic' here is explicitly Freudian, with, I would suggest, an Audenesque spin.

In his 1935 essay 'Psychology and Art Today', Auden gives his clearest expression of his psychoanalytic commitments – Freudianism transformed by his attachment to Homer Lane, Georg Groddeck and John Layard. As Rod Mengham has argued, 'from the start of his career as a writer, Auden became used to thinking about psychological models in relation to the customs and rituals of an entire society, rather than exclusively with reference to the personal history of the individual'.<sup>8</sup> Lane's work with young delinquents at the 'Little Commonwealth' remand home, Groddeck's concept of the Id as a collective force animating the psyche of all citizens, and Layard's anthropology consolidated Auden's

preference for a Marxist concept of the unconscious as a social phenomenon. As he argued in a note in the late 1920s: 'Freud's error is the limitation of neurosis to the individual. The neurosis involves all society'.<sup>9</sup> This social neurosis meant that the Freudian elements of his thinking were always applicable to larger moral issues. In 'Psychology and Art Today', he interprets a morphia addict's cliff-hanging dream, reading it as a fantasy that mimicks the transformations of art: 'Not only has the censor transformed the latent content of the dream into symbols but the dream itself is no longer a simple wish fulfilment, it has become constructive, and, if you like, moral.'<sup>10</sup>

'Fulfilment' is a key word in Larkin's *Jill* – it occurs most significantly in the context of Kemp's analysis of one of his sexual fantasies in terms of a drama about the vanishing difference between 'Fulfilment and unfulfilment' (225). Larkin was a fervent disciple of Auden's till half-way through the war, and this included the social sense of Freudian psychology: symbols are Freudian, and have analyzable social-collective allegorical effects. Larkin concedes that the bombing of Coventry may have fulfilled his own wishes in *Jill*, for symbols are the signs in texts that the constructive, moral transformation of art masks and betrays acts of censorship and wish-fulfilment. Larkin would not have used the word 'symbolic' without recognizing this turn upon himself. Indeed, the story of the pronominal move from 'I' through 'you' to 'he', which the Coventry blitz enabled, scripts the history of the construction of Kemp as autobiographical guise. *Jill* dramatizes the act of self-censorship implicit in any fulfilment as constitutive of the construction of a persona and its accompanying impersonal

narrative voice. Larkin can become Kemp and thereby fulfil his desires to annul his past, wipe out his childhood: that is, only through the radical 'unfulfilment' consequent on the destruction of his autobiographical subjectivity. The trace of that process of unfulfilment is legible as self-censorship, censorship which constitutes the new freedom fashioned by the double author-subjectivity: a persona-self generated by an impersonal narrative voice without a history. What needs to be acknowledged here is that Larkin is *displaying* the process of such self-censoring construction and self-fashioning as psychoanalytic symptom. In other words, the symptom is on show, and is meant to bear the marks and traces of the history of its construction.

The *Jill*-version of the Coventry raid, since it so openly begs for ascription to Larkin, demands, as though in defiance, analysis of the symptom displayed as deliberate censorship of some dark secret in Larkin's story that is 'connected with that town'. I would suggest that the bombing annulled Larkin's relations to Coventry as precisely his father's city: the open secret turning for readers now round knowledge of his father's fascism and the ways it might have affected his childhood. The annulment is there on the surface of Larkin's texts as a perfect open secret, for Larkin displays both the liberating act of self-censorship ('all the suffering connected with that town, all your childhood, is wiped out') as well as the history of the blitzing transformation of psychobiography into writerly personae and impersonal narrative voice. The annulment remains secret because to reverse the process by which the latent content of his father's politics came so



spectacularly to be wiped out would be to fall foul of the very vulgarity that the sophistication of Larkin's display seems to rule out.

In the curious cartoon Larkin attached to a 1938 letter which Thwaite put on the front endpaper of his edition of the letters, we see an embarrassed Larkin listening to his father's pro-Nazi rant (a letter Thwaite, curiously, did not publish). We hear his father predict: 'Well, all I hope is that we get smashed to Hades'.<sup>11</sup> November 1940 fulfilled Larkin's father's hope. As the *Jill* staging of the Coventry Blitz and the drawing of his family in the endpaper show, Larkin is red-facedly anxious about his father's championing of the Axis cause.

Speculation about this obscure wartime transition from father's son to autonomous artist is one of the effects Larkin's censoring of his father's fascism was designed to unleash upon his own literary work, like some carefully planned postmortem time-bomb. This article will be looking at the figure of his pro-fascist father as a textual and cultural absent-presence in Larkin's work rather than the strictly biographical figure. It is clear that Larkin had extremely mixed reactions to Sydney, ranging from the bile against his parents in letters to friends, to the affectionate letters home from Oxford. It is also clear, from Andrew Motion's biography, that Sydney Larkin was pro-fascist and that the war did little to dent his persuasion. As Alan Bennett put it in his reflections on Motion's biography:

Sydney Larkin was the City Treasurer of Coventry. He was also a veteran of several Nuremberg rallies, a pen-pal of Schacht's, and had a statue of Hitler on his mantelpiece that gave the Nazi salute. Sydney made no secret

of his sympathies down at the office: 'I see that Mr Larkin's got one of them swastika things up on his wall now.' [...] when Coventry got blitzed, the Nazi insignia [had to come] down from the wall [...] (a quiet word from the Town Clerk). But he didn't change his tune, still less swap the swastika for a snap of Churchill, who had, he thought, 'the face of a criminal in the dock'.<sup>12</sup>

This historical Sydney Larkin becomes an absent presence and textual creature in Larkin's Audenized writing with the internalized father as imago, generated by the feuds and stifling autocratic control exerted by Sydney Larkin over the family home, as outlined in Motion's biography. The Oedipal desire to censor the paternal imago is given spectacular reality in the Blitz, as Kemp's enthusiasm at the prospect of a cancelled childhood implies. As Adrian Smith has argued, 'the *Luftwaffe* wiped out the heart of [Coventry], and in so doing conveniently wiped out uncomfortable childhood memories', including his father's possible membership of the pro-Nazi, pro-Appeasement organisation The Link.<sup>13</sup>

At the heart of his 1940s work, then, is a deliberate act of self-censorship, a performed cleansing of the record to erase traces of his father's influence.<sup>14</sup> I would argue that Larkin had come to realise that the Second World War was an event that annulled its pre-war traces, like a Lethe stretched across the space-time of European cultural memory. It worked in this way because of the sheer scale of the war and the annihilating effects of the bombing campaigns, quite literally effacing the houses, homes and townscapes of childhood. This gave individuals

potential and scope to live out psychoanalytic revenge narratives that the war had scripted for their own privacies. Larkin's journey across the waste land of Coventry in 1940 became 'symbolic', for him, of a self-satisfying erasure of his family traces. In both cases, the erasure is there for all to register and interpret.

As in any carefully planned erasure, traces of the act of erasure are meant to remain, importantly *there* on the surface of the texts being generated by the 'blitzed' textual subject. If we look at the texts Larkin produced taking the Coventry blitz as their topic, the patterns of self-cancelling censorship are tacitly traceable. In the 1943 'A Stone Church Damaged by a Bomb', Larkin compares the bombed church to a 'scaffolded mind' unlikely to 'rebuild experience'.<sup>15</sup> Ordinary pre-war life accumulates experience like a slowly accreting coral reef, making 'patterns' none sees. It is this secret 'pattern' that the war has rendered permanently invisible. In the preface to *Jill*, Larkin had remarked on the effects of the austerity of wartime conditions in Oxford: 'Its pre-war pattern had been dispersed, in some cases permanently'. It is this dispersal of pre-war pattern that is uppermost in Larkin's mind as a deliberately staged pseudo-unconscious opportunity. The last stanza of 'A Stone Church', indeed, is purposefully ambivalent about the bombing. The German bomber is figured as modern death scattering 'magnificence' that rivals the church's stone memorial to traditional death.

If there might be something magnificent about the brutal dispersal of pre-war patterns, then we must, surely, wonder why. Not so much an answer but an admission of erasure is offered up in the other 1940s poem explicitly about the

Coventry raid, the 1949 'On Being Twenty-six'. Here Larkin reflects on 'the slag/Of burnt-out childhood', and finds it difficult and grisly to 'recall// At any moment, states/Long since dispersed' (24-5). The dispersal of pre-war states and patterns is figured as a direct effect of the Coventry raid with the incendiary imagery, and related to the destruction of his childhood. The incendiary bomb that has burned out his childhood is admitted as fulfilling his own unconscious wishes, the 'pristine drive': 'What caught alight// Quickly consumed in me,/ As I foresaw'. This is deliberately difficult about what it is that has been consumed, though the next lines evasively offer up 'Talent, felicity'. These lines get closer:

struts of greed, a last  
Charred smile, a clawed  
Crustacean hatred, blackened pride - of such

I once made much. (*Collected Poems*, p. 24)

What has been consumed by the Coventry raid, imaginatively, is the body of a destroyed identity (as the last stanza's image of the kissing clutching daft mother and her putrid child implies). What that child self is associated with is something that is now tarnished and blackened, something resembling a set of beliefs because it is a 'stance' that once pleased that self. The set of beliefs have something to do with organized primitive strutting hatred ('a clawed/Crustacean hatred, blackened pride'). The lines work as a kind of riddle, circling round this 'something', challenging readers to construe an interpretation. 'Blackened' works

two ways: the charred carbon remains of an object in a burned-out house; the blackened reputation of a proud 'unnoticed stance' once held. The meanings come together in the beliefs associated with his father: they structure the pre-war pattern that the Coventry raid has 'since dispersed'. 'On Being Twenty-six', written a year after his father's death, lingers over 'that world', the lost world that is now as 'dead' as his father is, a world become erratic, cryptic in its dangerous set of suppressed meanings.<sup>16</sup>

The elegy Larkin wrote on his father, the April 1948 poem 'An April Sunday Brings the Snow', finds domestic comfort in the fact that now his father's historical memory has been unnaturally blanked out and covered, as the plum trees have by the unseasonal April snowfall. His father's time is packed away, like the fruit in the jam jars the son is moving in the poem, under wraps ('Behind the glass, under the cellophane'). The patriarchal imago is rendered merely sentimental and insignificant by the death. His memory is now 'sweet / And meaningless, and not to come again' – the lyric voice is free to transcend the patriarchal family and its political and Oedipal conditions.

The Coventry bombing is being displayed as introjected, as an internal force both dispersing blackened prewar beliefs and generating a childhoodless subjectivity, free of patriarchal history rendered sweet and meaningless by the war and its deaths. In the terms of the 1946 poem 'Many famous feet have trod' : 'We are born each morning, shelled upon' (15). It is a birth into a potentially liberating, frighteningly provisional, relativistic identity 'devaluing dichotomies', '[e]mpty inside and out' ['Sinking like sediment through the day', p. 27]. This

renewal is achieved by a blitzy censorship of the previous self (self as child and son), which survives in cryptic, barely legible signs or words: 'Turn it about: it is impenetrable./ Reverse and obverse, neither bear/ A sign or word remotely legible' (pp. 15-6). What is impenetrable in 'Many famous feet have trod' is the talk of lineage, the attempts to decode some shameful ancestry:

Beyond each figured shield I trace  
A different ancestry, a different face,  
(*Collected Poems*, 16-17)

What must it be for Larkin to be necessarily ashamed of his own sorrow for his lineage and ancestry? What is it in his family (the figured shield being the allusive arms of an armed family name) that in 1946 would make Larkin sanctionable and blameworthy?

The answer is encrypted within 'I Remember, I Remember', the 1954 poem about another return to Coventry. In this poem, Larkin returns to the impenetrable sign, the illegible word of 'Many famous feet have trod', and finds that the word is 'Coventry':

I lean far out, and squinned for a sign  
That this was still the town that had been 'mine'  
So long, but found I wasn't even clear  
Which side was which. (81)

Buried in the squint syntax of the lines (in the knowledge we now have about Coventry and the part Larkin's father, as treasurer, played in making it Larkin's home town) are intimations of perplexity about sides, about direction, about the recognizable features of this his father's city: 'I wasn't even clear/Which side was which.' These lines retain the faintest trace of censored questions of allegiance as well as containing a concentrated reference to the war's annulment of his childhood. Coventry is now not the place where he has his roots, 'only where my childhood was unspent' (81). The poem goes remorselessly through the process of that unspending annulment.<sup>17</sup> Coventry is only where a typical English childhood did not take place. What did take place was his father's prediction, 'Well, all I hope is that we get smashed to Hades', remembered in the friend's comment in the poem: "'You look as if you wished the place in Hell'" (82). The Larkin persona concedes that it may not be 'the place's fault', which raises the question as to whose fault it might really have been. Though the poem finds curious solace in the nothing to which censorship and bombing have reduced the Coventry childhood, it bears remotely legible traces of the act of unspending, the guilty, shameful burying of the father and his extreme views.

In the 1949 poem 'To Failure', Larkin is aware that the days, once they 'fall behind', 'look like ruin'. His past had been 'symbolically' ruined for him by the bombing of Coventry (28).<sup>18</sup> The ruin of past days enabled him to script his childhood as 'a forgotten boredom'.<sup>19</sup> Tacit encrypting of the reasons behind the act of forgetting survive as traces in the script of the censored childhood.<sup>20</sup> In the

1950 'Coming', the thrush's song reminds the I-voice of a cleansed myth of happy childhood, and the voice happily cooperates in the construction of a new provisional pseudo-subjectivity *as* I-voice. But under the happy mythical identity is the dark image of a child peeping in on a primal scene:

And I [...]

Feel like a child

Who comes on a scene

Of adult reconciling

He comes, in the sexual sense,<sup>21</sup> on witnessing the orgasmic cries ('unusual laughter') accompanying the sexual congress ('adult reconciling') of his parents, the primal 'scene'. It is significant that the thrush's song begins by reconstituting a family house, ('the serene/Foreheads of houses', the 'deep bare garden', the astonished 'brickwork'). This, in a sense, is as much of a fiction as the future 'splendid family' denied by Larkin in 'I Remember, I Remember', but it points the way to the extreme tension in Larkin's poetry during the 1940s between a childhoodless blank selfhood moving through its present-tense time, and a dangerous pull backwards (the 'instinct-to-turn-back' of 'Many famous feet have trod'). As he wrote to Sutton just a month before writing 'Coming': 'we all find ourselves steering upstream, if our power is strong enough to carry us, despite our protestations that spiritual health lies only downstream with the blood-ties of family and race' (26 Jan 1950, *Selected Letters*, 157). 'Coming' is in many ways a



dramatizing of the dream of blood-ties in its reconstruction of the pre-war house and garden, a staging of the self-deluding construction of a splendid family. But the sexual, Freudian drama that the dream unearths signals the dangers of the instinct-to-turn-back in Larkin's case.

Larkin's two novels are bold admissions of fantasizing self-censorship as wartime authorship and self-fashioning. What is being openly dramatised is the construction of a splendid family fiction in Kemp's private fantasy about a wholly invented sister at a boarding school in Derbyshire, defined by Alan Brownjohn as 'a beautiful dream of middle-class culture and manners'.<sup>22</sup> In *A Girl in Winter*, Katherine's pastless exile in a foreign country (perhaps exile from a fascist or complicitly neutral state) and her indulgence of fictional nostalgia for Robin Fennel's home and country give guise, scope and narrative to Larkin's desolate sense of blitzed identity and fantasy construction in the late 1940s. The novels are overtly concerned with self-censorship, with shame about past and family, with fantasies that construct artificial middle-class English selves, and with war-induced guilt, functioning as open secrets comparable to Larkin's more cunningly cryptic erasures in the poetry.<sup>23</sup> They are complemented by the weird and extraordinary schoolgirl fictions Larkin wrote too, collected and edited by James Booth, *Trouble at Willow Gables* and *Michelmas Term at St Bride's* – which dream of a parent-less childhood through a sex-changed erotic dream of transcendence of the biographical self.<sup>24</sup>

What happened between the bombing of Coventry and these acts of fantasizing censorship (either entirely annulling his childhood, or constructing a

splendid or chillingly featureless family fiction) was, arguably, Larkin's acceptance of Auden's strictures concerning the family as ideological pressure-house. 'To be posh, we gather,/One should have no father' quips Auden in 1929.<sup>25</sup> 'Harrow the houses of the dead; look shining at/New styles of architecture, a change of heart,' he had preached ('Sir, no man's enemy, forgiving all', *English Auden*, 36). In 1939, Auden was wondering where the chilling fascists of the new war would come from, '[t]hose whom we so much dread/As on our dearest location falls the chill/Of the crooked wing'. And the fascists are children without a trace of children's 'anarchist vivid abandon', long adapted to 'the night and the nightmare':

They arrive, already adroit, having learned

Restraint at the table of a father's rage.

[ 'Where do They come from?', *English Auden*, 243-4]

The Coventry air raid had harrowed the houses of the pre-war dead. It had symbolically wiped out the 'dearest location' of Larkin's childhood overshadowed by the chilling crooked wing of fascism. It had shown Larkin how much of his adroitness and restraint owed to the 'clawed/Crustacean hatred, blackened pride' of his father's pro-Nazi rants. But it had also given him an opportunity to annul the pre-war, to unspend that childhood, to lay his father's ghost by harrowing his shade.

The attempts by Larkin to censor Noel Hughes's article about his father's extreme views for *Larkin at Sixty* are recorded in the letters – in particular the 10 May 1981 letter to Thwaite about the 'emended version of the remarks about my father' in the Hughes article, and the letter to Hughes himself (10 May 1981) protesting about the references to 'my father and home' (Thwaite, *Selected Letters*, 648-49). These attempts were successful insofar as Hughes had to tone down any overt reference to Sydney Larkin's political allegiances. As published, Hughes merely notes that Sydney discovered 'qualities of decisiveness and vigour in German public administration that compelled his admiration' (Hughes, 21). It is inconceivable to me that Larkin would not have known that this act of censorship of his father's politics would become known on posthumous publication of his own letters. As he remarked to Hughes in the 1981 letter referred to above, '[Your contributions] read more like a posthumous article, to be published when I was no longer around to mind' (Thwaite *Selected Letters*, 649). In writing those letters, Larkin knew that, once dead, all would be known. But by then, as his absolute secular creed taught him, he would be wiped out, dead, like old Coventry, nothing but text and trace.

The Coventry blitz put the prewar past to sleep: situated 'outside this shattered city', Larkin wrote in 'New Year Poem', written December 1940, 'it is better to sleep and leave the bottle unopened' ('New Year Poem', 256). The state of sleep is a choosing to forget, the mind 'wiped calm/As sea-levelled sands' ('How to Sleep', written 1950, 35). Sleep censors the words and actions that 'bleakened waking' before the war, the mornings Sydney Larkin woke his son

with his cicatrizing voice. Larkin stopped his diary during the war, a deliberate 'stun to memory', burying his father's words and actions, looking back on them:

Like the wars and winters  
Missing behind the windows  
Of an opaque childhood.

(*'Forget What Did'*, 184)

The title of the 1971 poem, *'Forget What Did'*, is suspended between a diary command to self to erase the past and a censored sentence which strikes through past subject and event (as in 'I forget what did ~~happen~~'). It thus enacts in little the act of erasure of childhood self and the events that might have occurred back then. The I-voice nevertheless desires a retrospect that preserves the erased trace of what has been censored or forgotten. It does not wish entirely to forget: it wishes to look back on what is missing, remotely visible as something lacking associated with wartime and the cold, dead seasons of childhood.

The wars and winters are there in the line, on the page, though missing. The childhood, though opaque, exists as the most evocative word in the stanza, organizing the lines into an allegorical scene: the child looking through the window out onto a wintry wartime world. The little scene is confused — why is it the childhood that is opaque and not the window? Do the windows represent childhood, are they real windows remembered, or figures for childhood's observation and insight? But it is this confusion that raises the most difficult

question: the wars and winters, once censored, have a knock-on amnesiac effect that blanks out not only childhood as foundational autobiographical episodic memory, but also the powers of observation associated with childhood, including the very possibility of observing history from the vantage-point of the autobiographically secure subject.

This sacrifice of memory and the power to read history is the necessary cost of 'cast[ing] off rememberings', in the words of the 1944 poem "All catches alight" (273). It entails an adoption of a rootless, heartless mobility defining lonely subjectivity precisely as inability to feel: 'What happened,' Katherine asks herself in *A Girl in Winter*, 'if she felt no humanity?'<sup>26</sup> Like a refugee or displaced person, the history that has been cast off and forgotten during wartime is nevertheless yearned for as absence since it also constituted the possibility of feeling for others. The motifs of travelling, winter and botched love affairs in Larkin's work turn round the costs of emotional self-censorship consequent on an annulling of familial childhood memories. Katherine can no longer love, since she has exiled herself from her home, from its history, from her childhood capacities to see and love others; through acceptance of the war's conditions and her wartime decision to adopt a censored subjectivity:

What abstract kindness she could command was at [Robin's] service, but it was no more than she might show to a fellow-traveller in a railway-carriage or on board a steamer. Indeed, that was the strongest bond she felt between them, that they were journeying together, with the snow, the

discomfort, the food they shared, the beds that were not warm enough. In this situation she need know nothing more about him. (*A Girl in Winter*, 237)

The 'audacious, purifying,/Elemental move'<sup>27</sup> away from home and childhood attachments is a radical dispossession of the subject of its desires to come together in love with another, of the securities of home and heart, of the emotional foundation of the nuclear family.

The '[o]ne man walking a deserted platform' may be, in his will to 'be each dawn perpetually journeying', free as the wind that beats 'each shuttered house' containing 'wife or child'. But he has also to kill off Love and lovers, dispossessed as he is of the emotional history he needs. The impersonal voice commanding perpetual movement, the voice that was born when the bombs fell on Coventry and which generated Larkin's personae, is the voice of death:

What lips said

Starset and cockcrow call the dispossessed

On to the next desert, lest

Love sink a grave round the still-sleeping head?

('One man walking a deserted platform', written 1944, 293)

The 'lips' seem to be commanding movement to save loved ones from death, yet that movement resembles the wind that beats at the house cradling the loved

ones. The dawn is 'coming', the wind '[d]riving' across, the wild wind is '[b]eating each shuttered house': the imagery summons fear of bomb raids, the 'shell' of sleep a flimsy defence against the shells that may fall. 'One man walking a deserted platform' measures the costs of adopting rootless mobility as a consequence of wartime: what seems at first to be an existential escape from the securities of the nuclear family reveals itself to be the obedience of the dispossessed to an unknown impersonal voice that is obscurely complicit in violence against wartime homes. The 'one man' may be a soldier sacrificing home securities to save the 'still-sleeping head' of his loved ones. But that patriotic duty reveals itself to be at one with the 'wind that runs wild', for he rides the winds 'as gulls do', dupe of the winds of war.

The dispossession Larkin saw as characteristic of war culture is so radical because it has been internalized as self-censorship, a censoring of the self as familial subjectivity. As such, it cannot be defined as a purely social phenomenon. For the act of internalization scripts the censoring voice calling the 'dispossessed/On to the next desert' as the psychoanalytic Censor of family drama.

In 'Conscript', the 1941 sonnet dedicated to Sutton, Larkin imagines an Audenesque exchange between the ego and a 'bunch of horsemen' who have 'violated' his land. The horsemen 'curtly asked his name' and their leader 'in a different dialect stated/A war was on for which he was to blame, // And he must help them':

The assent he gave  
Was founded on desire for self-effacement  
In order not to lose his birthright; ('Conscript', 262)

The ego is on the wrong side, forced into conscription to save his birthright, but also, crucially, assenting to the enemy leader's propaganda: he is to blame for the war. He knows he will lose his land and be murdered in the conflict. The land is the 'ego's county he inherited/From those who tended it like farmers', which is riddling. It seems to say that the conscript inherits the county from his kin, but oddly doesn't mention his father, though the patronymic is enough for the conscript to be accused. The land is inherited from 'those who tended it like farmers': does this mean they were not farmers? The evasion in 'like farmers' coupled with the talk of inheritance raises the ghost of the word 'fathers': a replacement of one phoneme. This effaced word exists in the line, 'Which would not give him time to follow further'. Further or father?<sup>28</sup> Nothing would be easier than this replacement, especially when replacing the phoneme enacts and constitutes the self-censoring dispossession involved in self-effacement.

'Conscript' is a difficult poem about war guilt, about his father's name, about being on the wrong side in the war. But it is most importantly about the transition forced upon the Larkin persona from father's son to 'self-effacement' and loss of home territory brought on by his father's inheritance in this war 'for which he was to blame'. The fact this is Auden pastiche foregrounds the cross-



over of political and psychoanalytic fields in this act of dispossession and self-censorship.

The four poems Larkin wrote in the immediate aftermath of the bombing of Coventry, 'New Year Poem' (31 December 1940), 'Story' (13 February 1941), 'The house on the edge of the serious wood' (before April 1941) and 'Time and Space were their only disguises' (before April 1941), all concern the necessary separation from the home. 'New Year Poem' looks at the 'shattered city' of Coventry and reads like an allegory of departure:

These houses are deserted, felt over smashed windows,  
No milk on the step, a note pinned to the door  
Telling of departure. (255)

The poem is about the need to forget prewar Coventry, identified in any case with fictional nostalgia: 'The Eden that all wish to recreate/Out of their living, from their favourite times' (255). This delusional nostalgia is rejected because of something dangerous at the root of the desire to lie about the prewar: 'Knowing by the flower the root that seemed so harmless/Dangerous' (256). Infinitely preferable to the lie of nostalgia is the lie that forgets the prewar, and fabricates a new identity.

'Story' is a poem about departure from 'a landscape known too well when young'. The persona goes South to find a location that suits his 'wished-for lie'. In

the new place, he occasionally thinks about 'his village', but 'forgot all this as he grew older' (257).

'The house on the edge of the serious wood' is a dream-like narrative of the ghostly return of the native. But the home town rejects him as a sinister foreigner: "'He's coming; be careful; pretend to be dead'" (258). Those who remain resent his intrusion, fear he might seek to manipulate their minds ('Imagined he wished them to mirror his mind'). The persona remembers his travels, always an escape from family (note the further-father evasion here too, with another self-reflexive allusion to the evasion in the first of the lines):

Seeking in one place always another,

And travelling further from mother, from mother. (259)

The people of the home town do not know about his memories of childhood there, and the persona seems secretly proud of this. But in the narration of the memories, all we get is a cryptic childhood, concealing strange dark patterns and secret signs:

These strange dark patterns of his heart's designs

That would only respond to secret signs. (259)

These memories, so opaque in their secrecy and obliqueness, can only be registered through the very same trope used in 'Forget What Did', the child

watching from a window: 'he watched from windows in the failing light/For his world that was always just out of sight' (259). The opaque childhood is a function of myopia, a not seeing. What is not seen only exists as sinister trace, coded as if by a subversive enemy spy.

'Time and Space were their only disguises' allegorizes the distance between wartime self and childhood subjectivity as an Oedipal conflict between Time and Space. Time and Space, the first line tells us, 'were their only disguises', and it soon becomes clear that their real names are Father and Mother (as in Father Time and Mother Earth). It is only under such heavy disguises that Larkin can get close to the real prewar atmosphere of his family home:

Time and Space were their only disguises  
Under which their hatred chose its shapes. (260)

The hatred between the mother and father translates the domestic home and garden into a psychological battleground. The son escapes on a train, the train's movements pacifying time and space as aesthetic categories, and he discovers a certain measure of self-respect and self-regard ('Stations like ships swam up to meet the train/ And bowed'). Then the blitz occurs:

But now this blackened city in the snow  
Argues a will that cannot be my own,  
And one not wished for (260)

Blitzed Coventry speaks to the son, arguing that its destruction cannot be blamed on him. He did not wish for its destruction. The city does, however, accuse Time, the father, and his sinister propaganda of Will, Hate and Pain. The mother is there to preserve distance between father and son: she it is who is the secret heart of Coventry, for she keeps them apart 'urbanely'. The disguises of Time and Space work for Larkin because the Coventry blitz led to his geographical exile from the city, a spatial exile that kept him apart from his father's views, now locked in history as time past. Space helps censor the prewar as Father's Time.

The war that destroyed Coventry had been prefigured in, prepared for by, the battles Larkin remembered between his father and mother before the war. His father is scripted as a propagandist of violence as Hate and Pain. Though absolved by Coventry, and protected by Mother Earth, the textual persona is displayed as tainted by, and guilty of, the political inheritance of the prewar years, as 'Conscript' and 'The house on the edge of the serious wood' show. A shadow of that guilt still runs through the very lines that serve to efface it: 'this blackened city in the snow / Argues a will that cannot be my own, / And one not wished for'. 'Argues' is fuzzily ambiguous, both implying that the blackened city is not voicing an opinion, and that it is open to interpretation, as in 'this blackened city in the snow is proof of the existence of'. What blackened Coventry for the city was not only the Blitz, but also the blackened reputation of his father. As such the 'cannot be my own' is a desperate ontological manoeuvre, denying

and censoring the terrible thought that something in Larkin may have willed the blitz of his father's hopes, wished bombs upon his father's city.

Larkin, as a conglomerate set of personae, admits the tarnish of guilt, reveals his father's presence in the act of effacing the prewar. Sydney Larkin survives as blackened trace, remotely legible as strange dark pattern and secret sign in the texts that remember the Coventry Blitz which wiped Larkin's childhood off the map of England. In the little cinema of Larkin's poems, a film is projected in the act of burning up, permanently but traceably destroying all 1930s scenes. If we wish to get close to the ways the Second World War disabled all political connections between the 1930s and the 1950s, we could do worse than to attend to Larkin's little cinema of self-censorship.

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<sup>1</sup> Norman Longmate, *Air Raid: The Bombing of Coventry, 1940* (London: Hutchinson, 1976), p. 216. For an excellent account of the Coventry Raid and Larkin, cf. James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Writer* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> 'Sydney Larkin, OBE, FRSS, FSAA, FIMTA, City Treasurer of Coventry for more than twenty years'. Noel Hughes, 'The Young Mr Larkin', in Anthony Thwaite (ed.), *Larkin at Sixty* (London: Faber, 1982), 17-22 (p. 20).

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life* (London: Faber & Faber, 1993), p. 27.

<sup>4</sup> Philip Larkin, *Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces 1955-1982* (London: Faber & Faber, 1983), p. 47. Cf. also the Haffenden interview: 'My father liked going to

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Germany, and took me twice, when I was fourteen or so. I found it petrifying, not being able to speak to anyone or read anything, frightening notices that you thought you should understand and couldn't. My father liked the jolly singing in beer-cellars'. John Haffenden, *Viewpoints: Poets in Conversation with John Haffenden* (London: Faber & Faber, 1981), p. 121.

<sup>5</sup> Tim Trengove-Jones links Larkin's stammer to his 'linguistic estrangement' in Germany. 'Larkin's Stammer', *Essays in Criticism*, 40. 4 (1990), 322-38.

<sup>6</sup> Philip Larkin, *Jill* (London: Faber & Faber, 1996) (1946), p. 202.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. his March 26 1941 letter to Sutton: 'Can't write away from Coventry.

Profound, sickening and inescapable conclusion: I am not, nor ever shall be, a writer.' Quoted Dorothy Richardson, 'Philip Larkin's Early Influences', *Northwest Review*, 30. 1 (1992), 133-40 (p. 135).

<sup>8</sup> Rod Mengham, 'Auden, Psychology and Society', in *The Cambridge Companion to W. H. Auden*, ed. Stan Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 165-74 (p. 165).

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Edward Mendelson, *Early Auden* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 52.

<sup>10</sup> W.H. Auden, 'Psychology and Art Today', in *The English Auden: Poems, Essays and Dramatic Writings 1927-193*, ed. Edward Mandelson (London: Faber & Faber, 1977), 332-42 (p. 336).

<sup>11</sup> *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin 1940-1985*, ed. Anthony Thwaite. (London: Faber & Faber, 1992).

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<sup>12</sup> Alan Bennett, 'Alas! Deceived', in *Philip Larkin* edited by Stephen Regan (London: St Martin's Press, 1997): 226-49 (p. 227).

<sup>13</sup> Adrian Smith, 'The Coventry Factor: Philip Larkin and John Hewitt', *Literature and History*, 8.1 (1999): 34-55 (pp. 49, 45). In a footnote, Smith informs us that 'Noel Hughes insists that Larkin told him his father was a member of The Link, and that he never categorically denied it [...] N. Hughes to the author,? April 1997' (Smith, footnote 56, p. 53). The Link was an Anglo-German organization, notoriously pro-Nazi, numbering Lord Redesdale and the Duke of Westminster among its members (*Encyclopedia of British and Irish Political Organizations* (London: Continuum, 2002), p. 631)).

<sup>14</sup> John Woolley has argued that Larkin's work is characterized by deliberate acts of sophistry, self-justification and evasive self-consciousness, particularly with regard to his autobiographical past. 'Larkin: Romance, Fiction and Myth.' *English* 35.153 (1986): 237-67. Cf. also Hugh Underhill's reading of 'I Remember, I Remember' as essentially anti-nostalgic, purposefully 'disallowing any nostalgic glow or any of the romantic conventions about childhood.' 'Poetry of Departures: Larkin and the Power of Choosing', *Critical Survey*, 1. 2 (1989), 183-193 (p. 187).

<sup>15</sup> Philip Larkin, *Collected Poems*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber & Faber, 1988), p. 269.

<sup>16</sup> James Booth has written movingly about the relationship between Larkin's retreat into the desolate attic of art and the death of his father which meant that, for two years, Larkin lived 'in claustrophobic frustration with his mother.' 'A

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Room with a View: Larkin's Empty Attic', *Bete Noire*, 12-13 (1991 Autumn-1992 Spring), 320-29 (p. 321).

<sup>17</sup> As Roger Sharrock puts it: 'The poet never underwent any of these experiences of growing up so much advertized in literature: therefore it is implied that they could not have happened.' 'Private Faces in Public Places: The Poetry of Larkin and Lowell', *English*, 36. 155 (1987), 113-32 (p. 118).

<sup>18</sup> Nigel Alderman's noticing of the importance of the topics of 'absence of home' and death of the father in Larkin's deliberate scripting of his fictional self in the late poems has informed my study. "The life with a hole in it': Philip Larkin and the Condition of England', *Textual Practice*, 8. 2 (1994), pp. 279-301.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. also his flip reply to Miriam Gross's question about his childhood: 'Oh, I've completely forgotten it', Larkin, *Required Writing*, p. 47) Also, in a manuscript version of 'Deceptions' analysed by Ridley Beeton, it is curious to find that one of the effects of the burying of the Mayhew girl in the long slum of years is noted by Larkin as 'No different life called childhood.' Ridley Beeton, 'The Early Philip Larkin: A Manuscript Exploration', *University of Cape Town Studies in English*, 15 (1986), 35-65 (p. 57).

<sup>20</sup> Peter Macdonald Smith's interpretation of Larkin's poetry as an exercise in dislocation of the self from the 'self' is relevant to my argument here: 'the poet distances himself from 'himself''. 'The Postmodernist Larkin', *English*, 38. 161 (1989), 153-161 (p. 156).

<sup>21</sup> In the manuscript version, Larkin moves from 'Looking for' through 'Who comes' to 'Who comes on' (Beeton, 59).



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<sup>22</sup> Alan Brownjohn, 'Novels into Poems', in Thwaite (ed.), *Larkin at Sixty*, 109-1191 (p. 13).

<sup>23</sup> On the strange sex-change fantasy that underpins both novels (Kemp into Jill, Larkin into Katherine), cf. Joseph Bristow, 'The Obscenity of Philip Larkin', *Critical Inquiry*, 21. 1 (1994), 156-81 (pp. 75-6).

<sup>24</sup> Philip Larkin, *Trouble at Willow Gables and Other Fiction, 1943-1953*, ed. James Booth (London: Faber & Faber, 2007). Cf. James Booth's introduction for a good discussion of Larkin's attitude to the war.

<sup>25</sup> 'The silly fool, the silly fool', *The English Auden: Poems, Essays and Dramatic Writings 1927-1939* ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber & Faber, 1978), 34.

<sup>26</sup> Philip Larkin, *A Girl in Winter* (London: Faber & Faber, 1975) (1947), 237.

<sup>27</sup> 'Poetry of Departures', 85.

<sup>28</sup> Larkin's poems alludes to the sixth ode of Auden's *The Orators*: 'Not, Father, further do prolong/Our necessary defeat' (*English Auden*, 109).