Poems, supplemented mostly in 2005 by Early Poems and Juvenilia. Now added to the one hundred or so poems published in his lifetime is more than two hundred and fifty poems from 1938-1945, and a scattering of ever never published in the 1950s and 1960s. While in another poet the early verse is often useful in identifying the aesthetic struggle that shaped the later poetry (Tom Pound, for example, and his work with and against a Symbolist poetics), it is telling that criticism has reluctantly discussed Larkin's earliest poems of Larkin. To do so, of course, is to risk losing the finely crafted image of Larkin the humanely, Larkin the parochial crank, Larkin the ironist. Unlike missing out on the nascent intellectual cosmopolitanism of Pound, there seems to be no loss in overlooking early Larkin, a time of growth Larkin himself dismissed in a preface to the 1966 reissue of The North Ship (1945): Looking back, I find in the poems not one abandoned self but many—the ex-schoolboy, for whom Auden was the only alternative to 'old-fashioned' poetry; the undergraduate . . . and the immediately post-Oxford self, isolated in Shropshire with a complete Yeats stolen from the local girls' school. This search for a style was one aspect of a general immaturity. (qtd. in Swarbrick 18) Following suit with a bionicizing twist, Stephen Regan, in an early discussion of the Collected Poems, finds in them the blood attributes of most British wartime poetry: "bellicose, mystifying, and resolutely apolitical" (67). The terms are precise, for it is the shockingly now ("This be the verse"), lucid ("Aubade") and politically poignant ("High Windows") that defines the mature Larkin; the opposite of these must be accounted for in the early poetry to posit his maturation development. Likewise, the title of A.T. Tolley's sensitive reading of Larkin's poetic development, My Proper Ground, explicitly charts a trajectory that makes Larkin's early poems, like his childhood, seem forgettable, unimportant, improper. To problematize the reading offered by Larkin and others means countering the reductionary model of poetic development, one that seems warranted by the poet's wryly voice in his most mature work, "Sad Steps," for example. "Sad Steps," of course, takes its title from sonnet 31 of Sir Philip Sidney's Astrophel and Stella sequence. Andrew Swarbrick briefly touches on the tested reading of the poem as an attempt "to rise above mere mockery" (146)—mockery, of course, being the catchall word for Larkin's attitude toward life and literary tradition. Such a limited reading seems now unjustifiable with the publication of Larkin's earliest poetry. Among the many interesting areas of research made possible by the Collected Poems and Early Poems, one is the study of Larkin's deep investment in the sonnet tradition, a form that almost never appears in his previously published work, and perhaps is best known for its notable absence in "Sad Steps." The early sonnets contextualize a fuller reading of the later poems such as "Sad Steps" by revealing Larkin's deep preoccupation with poetic form, and the tenuous survival of a specifically English poetic sensibility in post-war England. Rather than mere juvenilia and the product of "immaturity," the overwhelming number of sonnets among Larkin's earliest poems indicate the start of a continuing poetic dialogue with the early modern poised and with themes salient to the early modern poetic tradition; they also help to explain his chief preoccupations with the problem of time and the function of art as a monument of survival. Instead of a schoolboy conventionalist, this young Larkin appears more like an artist innovatively experimenting with the sonnet form in the crafting of poetic voice. That the sonnet would appeal to Larkin is hardly surprising. Always in conflict with influences and with himself, Larkin no doubt found in the space of the sonnet the dynamics of analysis. Analysis, at least according to Paul Oppenheimer in his discussion of the sonnet in The Birth of the Modern Mind, is the unique historical function of the form, since it is "the first lyric form since the fall of the Roman Empire intended not for music or performance but for silent reading. As such, it is the first lyric of self-consciousness, or of the self in conflict" (3). It is this later self, the self in conflict—in a struggle with time and thus ineluctable mortality—that produces self-consciousness and the stinging awareness of human limitations in the calculus of Larkin's early sonnets. Notably it is the failing of the struggle that runs throughout Larkin's sonnets, a recognition that would guide one of his most memorable poems, "Aubade" (1977), where "Death is no different whined at than whispered" (208). As a young poet, he imagines this struggle in two opposite settings, the natural and the social, settings which would fuse seamlessly in his later verse, when, for example, parting "thick curtains" in "Sad Steps" reveals a commonplace vital natural world, "the rapid blue, the moon's cheathouse" (169). The early sonnets base the traces of Larkin's meditation on this fusion as he revises his literary heritage. One of the oldest poems in the new collections is a sonnet from his sixteenth year, a poem that demonstrates, if not a probable reading of the first English sonneteer, Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, at least a remarkable grasp of English poetics that Surrey employed in inspiring the sonnet form Italy. Larkin's sonnet, "Winter Nocturne" (225), is a meditation on the self in relation to the natural world. Such a relationship seems stable to Larkin precisely because of the time and the season: a winter evening is stealing in, and the poet, reflecting on the coldness of the outside world, clearly realizes that such desolation is inevitably his lot. Larkin's identification with and times will continue throughout his career, providing the setting for "Aubade," a sonnet song that refuses to shake the morbid aura of its opening sonnets. Regardless of the season, Larkin's "Winter Nocturne" is his winter revision Surrey's "The sonne season," one of the first sonnets in the English language, a lengthy catalogue of the "bud and blossom" of Spring that contrasts the external world with the internal state of the speaker. Surrey's catalogue utilizes the alliterative line of the Anglo-Saxon tradition: Summer is come, for every spray now springs. The hart hath hung his old head on the pale; The buck in brake his winter coat he flings; The fishes float with new repaired scale, . . . (Jones 101) Structured around a repeated ABAB quatrain, Surrey's form tends less to analysis and more to the accumulation of detail, compiling the evidence of the season's fertility. Surrey's couplet, a concluding (AA) finale of repetition, is thus loaded with the weight of refutation, or, at least, differentiation, unsolved by a volta in the previous lines. Line 13 marks the moment the poet withdraws from the promise of the season, signaled by the appearance of "I." "And thus I see among these pleasant things / Each care decays; and yet my sorrow springs." The poem ultimately yields to a sentimentality that belies the heavy consonantal thrust of its preceding lines. It is worth noting that the sonnet itself is not responsible for the sentimentality. The Italian sonnet, "Spring," by Gerald Manley Hopkins, another sonneteer familiar to Larkin, employs the volta to underline the effusion of the season: "What is all this juice and all this joy?" (Jones 138). Like Hopkins, the Larkin of 1938 appears determined to defuse sentimentality wherever he finds it; unlike Hopkins the vision is cultivated to desolation, intelligent. In his nature poems Larkin is reluctant to celebrate the Spring for fear of sentiment; such reluctance arises again and again in Larkin's verse, mostly in poems that announce their suspicion of new life. "A bright relic of an where cold was" (1962), for example, Thus, Larkin turns to winter not so much to celebrate as to catalogue. Larkin's interrogation of Surrey's poetics and the literary tradition is clear from the opening lines: Mantled in grey, the cloak seals slowly in, Crossing the dead, dull fields with footsteps cold. The rain drips dreamily; night's fingers spin A web of drifting mist o'er wood and wold. . . . (225) The alliteration, the heavy caesuras, perhaps even the diction ("wold") all reveal a younger playing fast and loose with the trademarks of early English poetry. The sonnet as a whole is unremarkable for its language and imagery; what deserves pause is the form Larkin employs. An English sonnet, "Winter Nocturne" holds out the promise of analysis and change, the kind felt in Hopkins' and weakly in Surrey's couplets. The expectation of such a change is the expectation of the poet's ability to effect a change in the natural world, taking the claim of an interiority inserted to the mood of rain: "drips dreamy," Line 9 properly begins with "But" (the only appearance of the word in the poem); however, the signal is false, are early insight into Larkin's awareness of readerly expectations and experimentation with poetic conclusion: The pale pool stands; paper round with rushes Sev And dotted with floating ones, it seems to want But for the coming of the winter night Of deep, December; blowing o'er the grasses Of faded summer. . . . In short, there is no true volta in "Winter Nocturne," a statement about the reader's sentimental expectation of the sonnet form as well as the poet's self-deprecating analysis of the sonnet and literary tradition. The appearance of change starting line 9 is Larkin's way of punctuating the illusion of the poetic mindset that privileges the poet's inviolable relationship to the world. In fact, a speaker does not even appear in the poem: the "footsteps" belong to the dead, the "silent face" belongs to the wind. Only the couples locates humanity, and, unlike Surrey's, the sense of independence and difference is anything but sentimental: "The rain falls still: hissing, the woods bemuse; / Dark night creeps in, and leaves the world alone." "The world alone" might be both a world unaffected by the onset of winter and darkness, and a world marked by solitude, alienation, and misery (note the masculine rhyme "bemuse"). Striking the delicate balance between these two poles is a dominating motif in Larkin's poetry. Again and again in poems such as "The Whitsun Weddings" the poet investigates whether, in fact, the world is at peace, if indeed the poet alone is afflicted by misery in an otherwise benign universe where, as in "High Windows," everyone but Larkin is "going down the long slide / to happiness, endlessly" (165). Larkin's work against the kind of nature cosmos that modeled by Surrey suggests where he comes down on the issue. Larkin is, however, a surprisingly slippery poet, and any attempt to sum him up with catchwords such as mockery, nostalgia, or pessimism, as critic Randel Stevenson has most recently done, is naive. In a review of Stevenson's account of contemporary British poetry that gives Larkin small standing, James Wood citation Stevenson for dismissing Larkin with the accusation that the poet is "backward-looking in theme as well as style" (qtd. in Woods 12). Apologetically, Woods points to the motivated quality of his mature work, poems such as "Aubade," "MCMXIV," and "The Old Fools." Such a defense, however, should also be pitched on account of the early sonnets. Together they exploit the backward glance in order to revise and upset traditional expectations of the form. One of the more interesting disturbances registered by Larkin, as felt in "Winter Nocturne," is the position of the poet effected from a world defined by solitude and temporal change. What the poet can contribute to the world, if anything, is never decided in Larkin's work. Consequently, he is caught between bemoaning the fate of humanity and celebrating the mystery of the human spirit and its artistic achievement that endures in the face of overwhelming odds. This tension, of course, informs "Aesthetic Fruit," where the sculptor's "faithfulness is effigy" shapes for all time, poetically, the "final blaze" of undying love for a couple who "would not think to be so long" (110-11). It is yet another poem that meditates on the power of the sonnet ("Sisters") and poetic form in general. That many critics are not sensitive to the ways Larkin questions radical instability in his own poetry Larkin, an instability that prompts his turns to tradition, is due in no small part to the ignorance of his early poems. One sonnet that engages these questions is "Street Lamps," a 1939 meditation on the function of the poet and the permanence of art. The poem again is concerned with darkness and temporal change: like "Aubade," it is sensitive to the implications of morning light, here the time when the street lamps stop burning. An English sonnet, the poem nevertheless uses the octave/sestet division to map the temporal (nightdown) shift. This practice of temporal mapping is employed throughout many of Larkin's sonnets and becomes a dominant feature in his mature work (qtd. in Swarbrick 18). In effect, the poetic space becomes also a dynamic dramatic space, where the participant-the poem, the antithesis of art is sunlit nature. Larkin's attitude towards this antithesis, on the one hand, is fairly cynical: impotent of thematic "needs," "old dance"? figure the poet as nothing short of delusional, not "hearing the hours slowly toggle past." However, reality emerges the autumnal poetic effort of the street lamp, as it "End the day, and tried to rival it." The end of the poem leaves unsolved the question whether or not the street lamp is to be placed in its rather heroic but vain effort of challenging the sun. Incidentally, the image of the "old dance" Larkin develops here should temper readings of one of his most well-known poems from High Windows, "The Old Fools." That poem, which R.P. Draper rightly reads as a moving "identification with the subject of senile decay" (qtd. in Swarbrick 127), becomes also, like many of Larkin's late poems, a consideration of the role of poet and poetry. Then, pause should be given to opening lines even as caustic as these: What do they think has happened, the old fools, To make them like this? Do they somehow suppose It's more grown-up when your mouth hangs open and drools. And you keep on pissing yourself, and can't remember Who called this morning? (136) In light of "Street Lamps" it is now possible to read the self-accusation in these lines, the image of the poet-as "old fool" still wondering about his task, whether what seems really "grown-up" is merely delusional insanity. The allusion to "pissing," of course, points back to "Sad Steps," another poetic meditation on mortality prompted by the night time domain of aging: "Groping back to bed after a piss." Remarkable in "Street Lamps," as the age of seventeen, the young poet hopes his vision of the artist both enabled by and threatened by the process of aging. Of course, it is the hope that is delusional here, as it is the elderly in "The Old Fools"; Larkin constantly resists hesitant to place himself square in the middle of the confrontation with death. Where he does, however, as in "Sad Steps" and "Aubade," the result is his most celebrated work. *** The discussion thus far has highlighted ways in which the sonnets provide a fuller picture of Larkin's development, specifically by suggesting how the mature work continued themes that preoccupy Larkin as a very young poet. And yet, this brings us no closer to refuting the historical charge against the early poetry, as "mediocrous, mystifying, and resolutely apolitical," essentially rooted in the quietist mood pervasive in World War II poetry. This mood is thought to have been best articulated in Auden's 1939 elegy for Yeats, where "poetry makes nothing happen." As seen in "Street Lamps," the efficacy of poetry is indeed at question in the early sonnets, poems which by and large avoid direct treatment of the neating upheaval in British world politics. However, far from mystifying, I believe that many of these sonnets reveal a poet more interested in critiquing the mood of rather than simply succumbing to it. Such a critique is evident in the early sonnets, particularly "Sonnet" (Sisters) and "Sonnet" (Sisters), poetically "textual knowledge" by means of the sonnet; their similarities and differences are instructive. An example of an Auden sonnet from the period is "Here War Is Simple," the twelfth in a sequence published in the collection Journey to a War (1939). The poem, more vigorously confrontational than anything Larkin would write, is the product of Auden's experience in China at the start of the Second World War after Japan had invaded China. Auden's choice of the sonnet derives in part from a need to complicate expected responses to the traditional form, driven by the similar desire to undo the customary responses to war. Such responses are easy, traditional, and distorting: Here war is simple like a monument: A big thing with no quarrels to resolve, Seen from a train it looks like one of us; Its ordered ranks are built of good intentions, Its ceremonies are those we understand, Its victims are not numbered, but are heroes, Its ruins are the result of a good war; Its dead are those we shall not miss at all, Their graves are marked with the sincerest emotions, Their epitaphs are those we shall not forget. Because it is a sonnet, the poem has to be read as a monument, but a reality of the moment, producing unseen genocide around the world: But ideas can be true although men die, And we can watch a thousand faces Made active by one lie: And maps can really point to places Where life is evil now: Nanking, Dachau. The sterling couplet is a clear reversal of the expectation that the simple sonnet form promises; shockingly reversed in its status as a quiet leftover, a monument, an artifact unable to communicate in the contemporary world. Of course, such was the apparent epitaph for the sonnet in the modernist imagination once T.S. Eliot was through with it in the opening 14 lines of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." There, the sonnet form merges into the modernist long poem, an ironic commentary on its status as nothing more than cultural bric-a-brac in the cluttered rooms of cultured scene; or, perhaps, it is a room itself, a poetic space for analysis where serious questioning ("What is it?") is no longer an option, as the couplet implies (what does it really). "In the room the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo" (11). In light of Eliot, Auden's sonnet is hoped to be the ethical material he expects the couplet to fraught. Note, however, rather than making a call to action, the poem is descriptive, but in a way that attacks the artifice ("And maps can really point to places") of politics (and poetry) that ignore life as it is really lived. While Larkin's comment from the North Ship acknowledges the influence of Auden as his "alternative to old-fashioned poetry," only by studying their sonnets together from these years can a sense of his debt as well as difference be realized. Three sonnets from 1940 and 1941, "Schoolmaster," "Story," and "Observation," capture the spirit of forgetting and flight from the trauma of the present. Larkin's interests, however, are insistently domestic, and the form is used to comment on the ways in which form and tradition can insulate the self from the outside world. Naturally, the poet's own insularity is at stake, and I would argue that this realization eventually makes Larkin abandon the form, associating it too closely with his own perceived failure as a poet. Indeed, "Schoolmaster," a dreary depiction of a provincial school teacher, eerily reads like Larkin as a twenty-year-old predicting his own bachelor future, spent largely as a librarian out of the limelight at the University of Hull. He sighed with relief. He had got the job. He was safe. Putting on his gown, he prepared for the long years to come That he saw, stretching like aisles of stone Before him. He prepared for the annual life. . . . (240) The familiar Auden staccato of the first line introduces a world of measured declarations, where form and ritual conspire in covering up "the annual life" the teacher leads. Likewise, "naturally" defines the life at the center of "Story," in which another "he," tired of provincial life with its "boring limbs," moves away from home and Recognized at once his wished-for lie in the inhabitants' attractive mouth. The church beside the marsh, the hot blue sky, Settled. And in this strange food his dreams. . . (257) The pronounced wishes at line 9 of "Story" ("Settled") revisits Larkin's habit for experimentation. The weight of the change never settles, of course, immediately it is a "stripe" of "dreams." This recognition of the fraud that lies beneath the most bombastic of extensions is the poetic vision unique to Larkin that reaches maturity in High Windows. It is, no doubt, what makes him such a powerful and relevant (perhaps, even, spiritual) voice for postwar generations living in the "paradise" of pills and diaphragms in "High Windows," which "Everyone old has dreamed all all their lives" (165). In appearance at the outset of World War II in his young poetry is worth noting: the creation of this "paradise" is, in part, a direct byproduct of the war, a people's attempt to bury themselves in constant comfort rather than risk engaging with the metaphysical hell of the outside world, where, as Auden writes, "life is evil now." Unique to Larkin is the desire for blindness in his characters, the willful disruption that doubtes the sense of fraud behind their lives. Like Auden, he is leaden to condemn or teach; he experiments with the traditional form to mimic the sense of dissolution that plagues his characters. Note, for example, how the English octave of "Story" unwinds into a corrupted sonet (EFEGEG) of remarkably weakened half-rhymes by which the form itself, like the character, seems to forget itself. Settled and in this strange food his dreams The friendly bally, satin, or lovely charm According to his moods. Yet he at times Would think about his village, and would wonder If the children and the rocks were still the same. But he forgot all this as he grew older. (257) Particularly telling is the difference in the finality of the couplet in the sonnets of Larkin and Auden at this period. In his search for a style Larkin is unrelentingly experimental, obviously drawn to the structural conceits of the sonnet, his ability to play with modesty expectations of finality, and hesitant to concede to, what Stephen Booth calls in his work on Shakespeare's sonnets, the "comfort of the couple" (223), the flare of resolution that turns off many a reader even to Shakespeare. That the issue of poetic closure concerned Larkin is evident in his critical writings concerning Emily Dickinson, he writes: "Only rarely, however, did she bring a poem to successful conclusion. . . . [T]oo often the poem expires in a mazed-out and breathless obscurity" (Required Writing 59). It should be obvious by now that his famous knack for closure ("Get out as early as you can / And don't have any kids yourself") owes no small part to his work with the sonnet form. Instead of "obscurity" or the comfort of resolution, Larkin dropped endings, as evident in "Story," that commented directly on the reading experience, on the poet's choice of form, and the power of poetry to communicate in the modern world. Such is the agenda of "Observation," a sonnet from 1941 that most directly engages the war cloud hanging over England. It is, like Auden's "Here war is simple like a monument," an interrogation of the role of poetry, the purpose of traditional forms in a time of unrest, but more specifically it is a poem about finality: Only in books the flat and fixed happens Only in dreams we meet and interlock, The hand impervious to nervous shock, The future proof against our vain suspense; But since the sideline of the incoming past Is where we walk, and it is air we breathe, Remember then our only shape is death When mask and face are sealed apart at last. Range finding laughter, and ambush of tears, Machine-gun practice on the hare's desiree Speak of a government of modeled fears. Shake, wind, the branches of their crooked wood, Where much is picturesque but nothing good. And nothing can be found for poor men's fires. (240) As a metapoetic observation, it is easy to track how the slightly altered form of the Italian octave (ABBA / CDDC) does not disrupt the expectation of what is "flat and fixed" about "books" or "dreams." The octave, in short, promises the flat and final formal regularity in the coming sestet that will assure a "future proofed against our vain suspense," the comfort of traditional form in a time of war. However, by means of the volta Larkin immerses the reader into the problem of time, particularly an awareness of the present world outside of books and dreams. With this temporal shift he effectively separates the literary "mask" from the human "face"—destroying poetic comfort and illusion—with a sestet directly addressed to the horrors of now. The pump of tradition conspires to disguise from ("metalled fears") in a world where "range-finding laughter," "ambush of tears" and "machine-gun practice" all bear witness that truly no "hand [is] impervious to nervous shock." In such a world all sense of class finality is undermined; not unlike the government models, traditional poetic form is held up as suspect. Thus, a fascinatingly premature couplet arrives in lines 12-13 that hanks in its sentimentalized apostrophe while calling for a poetic break with the picturesque poery of the poet (sentimentalized apostrophe, included). Shake, wind, the branches of their crooked wood, Where much is picturesque but nothing good. And nothing can be found for poor men's fires. The GG couplet of the sonnet effectively stands the final F line, a conclusion mourning the plight of poor men who lack resources in a world that has destroyed their reason for survival. Read in light of Larkin's search for a style, "Observation" might be read as Larkin's farewell to the sonnet form. While he continued to consider Larkin's literary heritage properly opens with "Groping," signaling the hemming quest that defined his search for style. Quickly registering the shock of the moon and the vitality of the outside world, by line 4 Larkin considers time (it's "four o'clock"), suburban dreams, and lives lived in the face of the time and death: Four o'clock: wedge-shaped gardens lie Under a cavernous, a solid-pitched sky. There's something laughable about this. (103) The second stanza, essentially, rehearses much of what Larkin realized in his work with the sonnets of the war; naturally, the phrase "he"—they are part of the "wished-for lie" of "Story." And yet, this is undoubtedly the poet's world. In he desubliming the very ground beneath his feet, his tradition and heritage? Readings of the poem that dwell on the loaded mock apostrophes to the moon assert that this is precisely Larkin's method. Questionable is the "Medallion of art" (reminiscent of "metalled fears") mentality against which Larkin struggled in his youth. Undoubtedly this is so, but perhaps Larkin is also acknowledging that such a mentality is necessary for survival, is the very means by which he reached this moment, aided by the pump and artifice of tradition. Such a reading means Larkin's "wake" ("We") is not merely as dramatic as it seems, hardly a surprise to readers familiar with his youthful experiments: High and preposterous and separate— Lounge of love! Medallion of art! O wolves of memory! Innnnnnnnnn! No, One shivers slightly, looking up there. The hardness and the brightness and the plain Far-reaching singleness of that wide stare is a reminder of the strength and pain Of being young; that it can't come again, But is for others undiminished somewhere. What follows "We" is not a dismissal of the moon as a symbol, but precisely the opposite: the moon becomes yet another symbol ("a reminder"), but this time fashioned along the lines of Larkin's idiom—something hard, bright, and plain. It is nothing less than an image of poetic form that remains Larkin, as does Sidney's Sonnet 31, in the struggle of his youth, a time of success and failure working with and against the sonnet form. In the reading the poem becomes a charged tribute to the way in which the literary tradition, unlike the poet, always survives, remaining always new, unspent, for someone "somewhere." This returns us, ultimately, to Auden, Larkin's most contemporary mentor in his "groping" for style, to complete that line that so often is left incomplete, but which, no doubt, Larkin knew well: "For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives. . . ." Bibliography Auden, W.H. Collected Poems. Ed. Edward Mendelson. New York: Vintage Books, 1991. Booth, Stephen. An Essay on Shakespeare's Sonnets. New Haven: Yale UP, 1969. Eliot, T.S. Selected Poems. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World Inc., 1964. Hopkins, Gerald Manley. The Major Works. Ed. Catherine Phillips. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002. Jones, Emrys. 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