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### **“Not only at exclusion”: The Picture of Nostalgia in Philip Larkin’s Poetry\***

Critics of Philip Larkin’s poetry seem to be divided between those who detect in it a profound nostalgic sentiment, bordering on – when not overflowing into – reactionary conservatism, and those who, on the contrary, lay emphasis on the intellectual aloofness and ironic detachment of the poet’s stance as typical features of the Movement, which Larkin was associated with when his first major collection of poetry, *The Less Deceived* (1955), was published<sup>1</sup>. Against any overly simplified explanations of a chronological evolution in the sensibility of the author, Andrew Motion pointed out that “the book that conforms most exactly to the attitudes and styles associated with the Movement” (1982, 77) would rather be Larkin’s second collection *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964).

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<sup>1</sup> Larkin’s *The North Ship* (London: The Fortune Press, 1945) can hardly be considered the poet’s first *main* collection, as Anthony Thwaite has made it clear both in his arrangement of Larkin’s *Collected Poems* ([1988] 1990; referenced as *CP*, followed by the page and lines number) – where *The North Ship* poems appear in the “early poems” section – and in his introduction to the volume (*CP* XV): “[...] Larkin’s reputation as a poet did not, in fact, begin with *The North Ship*, which on its first appearance was hardly noticed”. Larkin himself seemed not to judge his first collection very kindly in at least two occasions: “I don’t think I had anything serious to write about in *The North Ship*; or at least if I had I couldn’t see it”, he said in 1967 in “A Conversation with Neil Powell” (Larkin 2001, 30). And in 1981, in “An Interview with John Haffenden”, he restated: “I can’t explain *The North Ship* at all. It’s not very good [...]. It’s popular with musicians, they like setting it. Musicians like things that don’t mean too much” (Larkin 2001, 50).

I will not enter into the debate as to the actual existence, consistency, and nature of the Movement as a uniform literary group and on Larkin's alleged affiliation to it<sup>2</sup>, a long-lasting dispute that Alan Jenkins (2009, 187) wittily condensed in the formula: “[d]enying the existence of the Movement, or denying that, if it existed, one had any part in it, seems to have started almost at the same time as the Movement itself”. What is undeniable is that criticism of the Movement acted as a prism through which Larkin's poetry has been read. It is also beyond doubt that the main features of the so-called Movement are suitable instances of the “aesthetics of emotional restraint” and “cold gaze” to which this volume is dedicated. As Stephen Regan summed it up:

The common assumption is that the Movement was largely a reaction against the inflated romanticism of the 1940s, a victory of common sense and clarity over obscurity and mystification, of verbal restraint over stylistic excess: in short, the virtues of Philip Larkin over those of Dylan Thomas. (Regan 1992, 13)

Anthony Hartley's article on the “Poets of the Fifties”, which appeared in the *Spectator* in 1954, describes the emerging line of poetry as “‘dissenting’ and non-conformist, cool, scientific and analytical” (Hartley 1954; quoted in Regan 1992, 15)<sup>3</sup>. A similar stance is expressed by J.D. Scott in his article “In the Movement”, published a month later in the same magazine, the article which gave the Movement its name: “The Movement, as well as being anti-phoney, is anti-wet; sceptical, robust, ironic” (Scott 1954; quoted in Regan 1992, 15).

In the more expansive essay “Beyond the Gentility Principle”, published as an introduction to *The New Poetry* anthology, Al Alvarez

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<sup>2</sup> Larkin's reply “No sense at all” to Ian Hamilton, who asked him if he had “any sense at that time of belonging to a group with any very definite aims”, has by now reached an almost-legendary status (“A conversation with Ian Hamilton”, Larkin 2001, 20). In the same conversation Larkin gives a rather detailed account of the origins of the “Movement”.

<sup>3</sup> To be thoroughly honest, Hartly accorded some specificity to Larkin's poetry, stating that “[a]nother more isolated tendency is represented by poets such as Philip Larkin and Philip Oakes who bring to their work a greater myth-making power and are less scared of emotion”.

sketched out the evolution of British poetry between the Twenties and the Fifties as manifested in three stages embodying three “negative feedbacks” which finally led to the Movement: “The third stage – he writes – was yet another reaction: against wild, loose emotion [i.e. against the emotional rhetoric of Dylan Thomas’s line]. The name of the reaction was the Movement” (Alvarez 1962, 19). In the end, the intention of his essay was to champion a more vigorous, more urgent style in contemporary English poetry: it sought to praise the poetry of a Ted Hughes as opposed to that of a Philip Larkin.

One of the first monographic volumes on the poet of Hull, Bruce K. Martin’s *Philip Larkin*, obliquely reveals all the complexity, paradox, and hesitancy that a discourse on the role of emotions in Larkin’s poetry can bring about. “The Larkin speaker – the author tells us – is almost always aloof and at most an unparticipating spectator at the rooted lives and pleasures of others” (Martin 1978, 45). However, a hundred pages later, with the Movement poetics in his line of sight, the author reveals different shades and shapes to his judgement on Larkin’s poetry:

If emotional detachment is a hallmark of Movement writing – and for many British writers emerging in the 1950s it was – then Larkin has never measured up to that standard. Even in his mature revolt against the romantic excesses of his early poetry there has continued to be not just emotion, but understanding and compassion for the emotions of others. (Martin 1978, 144)<sup>4</sup>

In an interview of Larkin, John Haffenden went straight to the point, asking the poet: “You think of yourself as an emotional poet, and it must strike you as ironic when some critics describe you as ‘neutral’ [...]?” The issue could be concluded here, but the poet’s answer is more nuanced and less categorical than the question:

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<sup>4</sup> In a note supporting his statement, Martin refers to Kuby’s similar refusal to strictly assimilate Larkin to the Movement, on account of Larkin’s attention to the surrounding world: “If detachment from the problems of the threatened world defines The Movement, then Larkin is not in it. [...] There are no tears in his poems but there is pathos aplenty” (Kuby 1974, 14).

Well, there are many types of emotion. I've said that depression is to me as daffodils were to Wordsworth. But a poem isn't only emotion. In my experience you've got the emotion side – let's call it the fork side – and you cross it with the knife side, the side that wants to sort it out, chop it up, arrange it, and say either thank you for it or sod the universe for it. You never write a poem out of emotion alone, just as you never write a poem from the knife side, what might be a letter to *The Times*. I can't explain it: don't want to. (Larkin 2001, 51)

A couple of questions later in this same interview, erroneously ascribing to Hardy an aphorism from a Walpole letter to the Countess of Upper Ossory (August 16, 1776), Larkin provides a formula that seems to roughly outline the polarities of this debate where aesthetic and psychology, poetics and worldview, mingle: "Hardy or someone said that life was a comedy to those who think, but a tragedy to those who feel. Good stuff" (Larkin 2001, 51). "Those who think" – and let's remember how the Movement's general tone was defined as "cool, scientific and analytical" – and "those who feel". But most of the time, such bipolar dichotomy, with its air of Jungian psychological types, haunts the very same feeling-and-thinking human being, torn between "heart" and "mind", as the Italian poet Giorgio Caproni – in his own self-description, a "rationalist who sets limits to reason"<sup>5</sup> (Caproni 1998, 1537) – put it in the poem "Foglie" (*Il franco cacciatore*, 1982): "Leaves / that only the heart sees / and in which the mind does not believe" (Caproni 1998, 448, l. 16-18)<sup>6</sup>.

Instead of dealing with the whole range of emotions (a task that, if feasible, would require an entire volume) or with emotion in general, I will narrow my focus to a single, specific, although multifarious feeling which, lying at the core of the debate on Larkin's sensibility, can be taken as exemplary of the poet's treatment of emotions. The medical nuance of the word "treatment" makes the term particularly appropriate to our discourse, given the nature of the sentiment at stake: nostalgia, whose terminological history began within the medical domain, with Johannes

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<sup>5</sup> "Io sono un razionalista che pone limiti alla ragione."

<sup>6</sup> "Foglie / che solo il cuore vede / e cui la mente non crede."

Hofer's *Dissertatio medica de Nostalgia, oder Heimwehe* (1688)<sup>7</sup>. Curiously enough, within the context of an “aesthetics of coldness” and “emotional distance”, we are addressing a feeling in which distance plays a crucial role; moreover, a feeling that is fundamentally triggered by distance (be it on a spatial, temporal, or existential level). In this sense, it is revealing that the PhD candidate in medicine Alexandre Mutel, in his 1849 thesis, proposed without success to replace the term “nostalgia” with the brand new “apodalgia”, which literally translates to the “pain of distance”, the pain of being “far away” and “separated from” (Prete 1992, 15).

In other words, is Larkin an emotional nostalgic poet or is he an analytical, ironic “cold-gazer”? Is it true that, as Alan Brownjohn stated in his monographic volume on the poet, for Larkin “[t]he good things (the innocence before the cataclysm of ‘MCMXIV’ [a poem we will pay particular attention to], New Orleans jazz in ‘For Sidney Bechet’) are almost always of the past, to be regarded with resigned nostalgia” (Brownjohn 1975, 10)? Are his poems, as Seamus Heaney (1995, 21) wrote commenting on four of them, among which “MCMXIV”, “visions of ‘the spiritual, Platonic old England’”<sup>8</sup>? Or rather does Donald Davie get closer to the truth when he affirms that the main difference between Philip Larkin and John Betjeman, whom Larkin greatly admired<sup>9</sup>, lies in Betjeman being “the most nostalgic of poets, Larkin the least” (Davie 1973, 65)? And if Larkin is a nostalgic poet, what kind of nostalgic is

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<sup>7</sup> A detailed medical history of nostalgia can be found in Bolzinger (2007). We owe Jean Starobinski the first, groundbreaking, critical studies on the subject: “La leçon de la nostalgie” (1962) and “Le concept de nostalgie” (1966).

<sup>8</sup> The phrase, as Heaney remarked is a borrowing from Geoffrey Hill’s borrowing from Coleridge. “MCMXIV” dates from 1960; the other three poems falling under Heaney’s category are “At Grass” (dating from 1950 and included in *The Less Deceived*) and two poems from *High Windows*, “How Distant” (1965) and “The Explosion” (1970), proving that a simple chronological explanation (from detachment to sentimentality or, even more unlikely, vice versa) would be misleading.

<sup>9</sup> In the 1964 interview with Ian Hamilton who asked him: “Of contemporary English poets, then, whom do you admire?”, Larkin answered: “You know I admire John Betjeman. I suppose I would say that he was my favourite living poet” (Larkin 2001, 25).

he? Which is the place accorded to the “heart” and which is the place accorded to the “mind”, to borrow Caproni’s terms?

In order to answer all these questions or, perhaps, this long multifaceted single question, Svetlana Boym’s precious distinction between “restorative” and “reflective” nostalgia will prove useful and should be kept in mind throughout the next pages:

Restorative nostalgia stresses *nostos* and attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home. Reflective nostalgia thrives in *algia*, the longing itself, and delays homecoming – wistfully, ironically, desperately. Restorative nostalgia does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition. Reflective nostalgia dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity. Restorative nostalgia protects the absolute truth, while reflective nostalgia calls it into doubt. (Boym 2001, XVIII)<sup>10</sup>

The poem singled out both by Brownjohn and Heaney, “MCMXIV”, is the perfect ground to test the pertinence of Boym’s intuition as well as that of the different positions within the critical debate on Larkin’s alleged reactionary nationalism – Osborne (2000, 147), for example, defined it “Larkin’s most patriotic poem” – and, by consequence, on the role played by nostalgia in his poetry. The title clearly refers to the year WWI broke out, 1914, written in Roman numerals “as you might see it on a monument” (Larkin 2001, 85), on one of those monuments standing as a tribute and memorial to those who fell in the war, those who in 1914 volunteered in the “long uneven lines” of the poem’s first line:

Those long uneven lines  
Standing as patiently

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<sup>10</sup> Fredric Jameson had previously attempted an unbiased revaluation of this emotion in his essay “Walter Benjamin; or, Nostalgia” (Jameson 1974, 82): “[...] if nostalgia as a political motivation is most frequently associated with Fascism, there is no reason why a nostalgia conscious of itself, a lucid and remorseless dissatisfaction with the present on the grounds of some remembered plenitude, cannot furnish as adequate a revolutionary stimulus as any other [...].”

As if they were stretched outside  
The Oval or Villa Park,  
The crowns of hats, the sun  
On moustached archaic faces  
Grinning as if it were all  
An August Bank Holiday lark;  
(“MCMXIV”, *TWW*, CP 127-128, l. 1-8)

The text is a description of English society just before WWI, the time when children dressed in dark and were “called after kings and queens”. A “description”, I said, but with all the features of an elegy where, as Regan (1992, 120) pointed out, “[t]he evocative details [...] serve to emphasise the difference between ‘then’ and ‘now’”.

According to Neil Corcoran (1993, 92), not only do these lines reveal “a poignantly patriotic regret” but, moreover, “the compulsions of nostalgia betray Larkin himself into an odd kind of historical ‘innocence’”, as if the poet had described an ideal too ideal. In other words, from this perspective, Larkin would inadvertently recreate a paradise on which the real history of England has never trod; a sort of false account of a past age which, when it was the living present, was rather different. In other words, a mythification and a mystification. Corcoran’s specific allusion is to the last stanza of the poem:

Never such innocence,  
Never before or since,  
As changed itself to past  
Without a word – the men  
Leaving the gardens tidy,  
The thousands of marriages  
Lasting a little while longer:  
Never such innocence again.  
(l. 25-32)

But any reading of the poem aiming at finding an “historical” truth would be a misreading: its topic is less a reality than an idealisation; it

is less a date than a symbol, whose symbolic nature is alluded to by the title format. If it is true that the past recreated in the poem is one of the clearest examples of an “Edenic, communal past, the passing of which is mostly contemplated with wistful regret and nostalgia” (Osterwalder 1991, 71), we should ask ourselves to what extent the poet himself looks upon his own creation as a “historical” one.

The line “Never such innocence”, and even more so the final “Never such innocence *again*” (*italics mine*), induces the reader into thinking of a dream all the more grieved over as held to be true, “again” implying a previous existence. However, the presence of “Never before or since” seems to complicate the appeal of such a lost Eden: that innocence, fixed in the very moment before the tragedy of the war, seems rather to descend from the light that what followed (i.e. the war) casts back upon it. The focus of the stanza is on change: “As changed to past / Without a word”. But has such an Eden ever been real? “Never”, “never before or since”, “never [...] again”: the insistent beating of that “never” seems to suggest the poet’s awareness of the fictional nature of the portrayal, like a midnight raven answering a lover who knows all too well the dreamy essence of his lamented Lenore, in an impossible different version of Poe’s poem (“if only history had been different”, one might gloss):

The repetition of ‘Never such innocence’ gives emotional emphasis to the poem’s sense of loss and yet it inevitably raises doubts about whether such innocence *ever* existed. In this sense, the impulse behind the poem is not so much nostalgia as an awareness of the desirability and yet fallibility of national ideals. (Regan 1992, 121)

Ideal past is not historical past, it does not coincide with the “truth” of what was, rather with the “beauty” that the very fact of not being anymore infuses into what was. In a very brief introduction to two of his poems that were included in an anthology, Larkin explained the reasons behind the choice of “Send No Money” and “MCMXIV”:

[...] they might be taken as representative examples of the two kinds of poem I sometimes think I write: the *beautiful* and the *true*. I have always believed that *beauty is beauty, truth truth*, [...] and I think a poem usually starts off either from

the feeling How beautiful that is or from the feeling How true that is. One of the jobs of the poem is to make the beautiful *seem* true and the true beautiful, but in fact the *disguise* can usually be penetrated. (Larkin 2001, 39; *italics* mine)

"Send No Money", to make it clear, was the representative example of the "true" kind of poem. "MCMXIV", on the other hand, as representative example of the "beautiful" kind, dramatizes a myth and, contextually, the awareness of its mythical status: "it is self-consciously rhetorical, and knows it is dealing in myths", Swarbrick points out, refusing Regan's interpretation of the poem as "a simple piece of patriotic nostalgia" and detecting in it, instead, a reverberation that runs beyond the fallacy of national ideals and propagates onto "cultural myths" (Swarbrick 1995, 118-119).

The description of this Edenic society draws on the conventional imagery of the time when Larkin composed his poems, between 1958 and 1960. Blake Morrison (1980, 197) discovered a telling literary precedent in Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (1956):

Always the same picture; high summer, the long days in the sun, slim volumes of verse, crisp linen, the smell of starch. What a romantic picture. Phoney too, of course. It must have rained sometimes. Still, even I regret it somehow, phoney or not. If you've no world of your own, it's rather pleasant to regret the passing of someone else's. (Osborne 1957, 17)<sup>11</sup>

It is hard to tell if Larkin had this passage in mind, consciously or not, while composing his poem, but Osborne's words certainly resound in a particularly suggestive key for reading Larkin's poem. The structure of "MCMXIV" is not very different from this excerpt: the first three-quarters of the poem offer a list of details evoking a perfection frozen in the instant before it's lost, a description which, despite a subtly allusive polysemy, remains transparent and unproblematic. Certainly, some irony is present from the beginning, but it is the last stanza, when the emotional climax is reached, that calls into question the very nature of the portrayal just drawn: the line "Never such innocence" seems to

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<sup>11</sup> J. Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), p. 17.

conceal a note of bitter awareness, the equivalent of “What a romantic picture. Phoney too, of course”; it looks like we can catch a glimpse of the crack, of the fissure through which, as Larkin warned his readers, “the disguise can usually be penetrated.”

As in many others of Larkin’s poems, the structure of “MCMXIV” is built upon opposite tensions in balance, leaving the question of the poet’s point of view unresolved, or better, open to two conflicting meanings. This structure, which has skilfully been detected by Nicolas Marsh, not only does not allow for a univocal interpretation, but calls indeed for two opposite readings, as if the poem was “double-yolked with meaning and meaning’s rebuttal”<sup>12</sup> – to which we could add: with emotion and emotion’s rebuttal.

The stanza’s syntax is intentionally ambiguous and deceptive. If its first line (“Never such innocence”) fosters doubt regarding the past existence of such innocence, the following line, “Never before or since” seems at the same time to assure and undermine its very substance: “never before or since”, as if to say, by opposition, that at that very moment it existed. But, precisely, it existed punctually, at that moment, not in terms of historical time. It existed instantaneously, as a condition received, by transitive relation and change of sign, from its forthcoming and unforeseen future. The face of innocence has here the features of naivety of these men waiting in 1914 to be enlisted as if they were going to a cricket or football game (“Standing as patiently / As if they were stretched outside / The Oval or Villa Park”), smiling, “grinning as if it were all / An August Bank Holiday lark”.

As it has already been pointed out by other critics, the absence of any main verb – “[...] it’s a ‘trick’ poem, all one sentence & no main verb!”, the poet wrote to Barbara Pym in 1964 (Larkin 1992, 366) – and the paratactic juxtaposition of details, creates an atmosphere of frozen innocence that recalls the immobility of a sepia photograph: “Lacking any main verb apart from an implied copula, the poem acts as a kind of

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<sup>12</sup> The phrase, taken from Larkin’s poem “If, My Darling” (*TLD*, CP 41, l. 21), was first used as a critical prism by Nicholas Marsh in the title of one of the chapters of his *Philip Larkin. The Poems* (2007, 154ff) where he describes Larkin’s poetry as the result of “dynamic structures that are balanced between opposing energies so that they remain, held in tension, in a sort of unresolved equilibrium”.

linguistic translation of the sepia of an Edwardian photograph” (Corcoran 1993, 92). The same remark has been made by Regan (1992, 121): “The steady enumeration of detail in ‘MCMXIV’ creates an effect of impressions gathered second hand from a sepia photograph.” Once again, the only, but substantial, difference between the two critics lies in the value they bestow on such association: where the former reads an awkward and naive portrayal of an ideal age, a cliché the poet fails to escape, the latter detects a sharp, conscious dramatization of the naïveté of all Edens, of the artificiality of all ideals, of their “beautiful” rather than “true” features, following Larkin’s distinction.

“MCMXIV” perfectly displays the major structural tensions that underpin many of Larkin’s poems, where two equal forces confront but do not neutralize each other. Indeed, a thoroughly irony-oriented reading would be as inaccurate as one considering the poem a wholly sincere elegy for the Edwardian age. Although the consolatory aspect of Larkin’s reconstruction is not overtly confessed, it is at least hinted at. But at the same time the myth is, in the end, kept alive: not as “true”, but as “beautiful”. “Never such innocence again” resounds as a final mourning for an innocence that, most probably, never existed, except in its features of naïvety. If this time, suspended as in a photograph, is really grieved over, it is so precisely because of its being suspended, removed from the historical flow of time, fixed as in all Edenic gardens before the fall into time and change. “Photographs state the innocence, – Susan Sontag tells us ([1977] 1990, 70) – the vulnerability of lives heading toward their destruction.”

Let’s then see what happens when Larkin – an amateur photographer himself – deals with “real” photographs, and when cultural, collective myths give way to personal, private ones. In “Lines on a Young Lady’s Photograph Album”, the opening poem of the 1955 collection *The Less Deceived*, the issue of the relation between “true” and “beautiful” interweaves with Larkin’s views on the past, art, “preservation”<sup>13</sup>, and the role of distance. Greedily looking through the young lady’s photograph album (“My swivel eye hungers from pose to pose [...]”, the first line unabashedly declares), the poetic I exclaims:

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<sup>13</sup> “I write poems to preserve things I have seen / thought / felt [...]”, Larkin wrote in his “Statement” for the *Poets of the 1950s* anthology (1956); now in Larkin (1983, 79).

But o, photography! as no art is,  
Faithful and disappointing! that records  
Dull days as dull, and hold-it smiles as frauds,  
And will not censor blemishes  
Like washing-lines, and Hall's-Distemper boards,

But shows the cat as disinclined, and shades  
A chin as doubled when it is, what grace  
Your candour thus confers upon her face!  
How overwhelmingly persuades  
That this is a real girl in a real place,

In every sense empirically true!  
Or is it just the past? Those flowers, that gate,  
These misty parks and motors, lacerate  
Simply by being over; you  
Contract my heart by looking out of date.

(“Lines on a Young Lady’s Photograph Album”, *TLD, CP 71-72*, l. 16-30)

These three stanzas at the centre of the poem reveal the poet’s true focus, as Swarbrick (1995, 49) points out: “[...] not the girl, but via photography, time and nostalgia”. And what at first seems a praise of aesthetical nature (“[...] o, photography! as no art is”) suddenly shifts into a different sphere, where *past* and *truth* do not match. What “MCMXIV” left implicit, is here made explicit. The truth of photography does not lie in the instant faithfully fixed but in its past essence, in the distance it spotlights, allowing the poet’s regret:

Yes, true; but in the end, surely, we cry  
Not only at exclusion, but because  
It leaves us free to cry. We know *what was*  
Won’t call on us to justify  
Our grief, however hard we yowl across

The gap from eye to page.  
(l. 31-36)

As in "MCMXIV", but even more overtly here, what triggers nostalgia is the "security distance" granted by time's irreversibility – "So I am left / to mourn (*without a chance of consequence*)/ You [...]"(italics mine), the stanza continues: the sentiment is possible only on condition that the lost paradise is truly and definitively lost, that it remains untouched, inaccessible: "In short, a past that no one now can share [...]" (l. 41).

Truth, then, resides not in the time fixed by the photograph album, but in the fracture and in the conscience of that fracture conveyed by the irony of several expressions where, as in "MCMXIV", the meaning is split and made ambiguous and the emotion is ambivalently felt. The Paradise to which the young lady's pictures are compared is grieved while being revealed as unreal, as an "ex post facto" construction:

[...] calm and dry,  
It holds you like a heaven, and you lie  
Unvariably lovely there,  
Smaller and clearer as the years go by.  
(l. 42-45)

"You lie": the once "young lady" *lies* at the core of the *lie* that denies change; she is part of the illusion created by photography, an illusion that replaces the fraud of "hold-it smiles" and poses with the fraud of eternal pause<sup>14</sup>. As in "MCMXIV", the title is revealing: the fraud is ironically unveiled by the polysemy of the very first word, "Lines": the lines, of course, the poet is writing, but also the wrinkles that now must have shaped the face of the once "young lady" and maybe, as Swarbrick (1995, 49) suggests, "the creases on the photo"; the lines as the signs of

<sup>14</sup> Larkin will make use of the same pun, the same ambiguity-inducing device in at least two other poems with the aim of questioning the emotional response to symbols and our relation to memory and the past, namely: in "Afternoons" (*TWW*, CP 121, l. 12-14: "[...] the albums / lettered / Our Wedding, lying / Near the television"), and twice in "An Arundel Tomb" (*TWW*, CP 110, l. 2: "The earl and countess lie in stone"; and l. 13: "They would not think to lie so long"), where the pun casts the first doubts on the sincerity of the emotion the monument – and let's recall the "monumental" nature of the title "MCMXIV" – is meant to convey.

ageing on the lady and on the picture despite what the picture tells. And maybe, also, a fourth meaning flickers there: the lines as the fingerprints left by the hand conducting that “swivel eye [that] hungers from pose to pose” in the very first line of the poem.

The distance between what is and “*what was*” cannot but increase, and only on account of such exclusion, of this condition of assured – and reassuring – exile, does regret become possible. If this description seems to apply to the natural condition of the nostalgic (since when the return is perceived as possible, nostalgia will vanish, 18<sup>th</sup>-century physicians claimed)<sup>15</sup>, then this process of “reassuring” identifies a peculiar feature of Larkin’s nostalgia: the return is not wanted, or more precisely and in a more complex way, if it is desired – if the lost object, time, condition are missed – it is so *uniquely* on condition (on the absolutely certain condition) that it will remain out of reach and that the past will not call upon the seeker to justify his grief. Twenty years after Larkin’s “Lines on a Young Lady’s Photograph Album”, Susan Sontag wrote:

It is a nostalgic time right now, and photographs actively promote nostalgia. Photography is an elegiac art, a twilight art. Most subjects photographed are, just by virtue of being photographed, touched with pathos. A beautiful subject can be the object of rueful feelings, because it has aged or decayed or no longer exists. All photographs are *memento mori*. To take a photograph is to participate in another person’s (or thing’s) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time’s relentless melt. (Sontag [1977] 1990, 15)

The author of *The Less Deceived* perfectly knows the illusory, deceptive mechanism presiding over photography: instead of stopping time, the snapshot highlights its incessant flow and creates the myth of an ideal past, often with the precious help of the selective process that informs any private photograph album – as well as any act of memory – as the poet will spotlight in a poem written one month after “Lines on a Young Lady’s Photograph Album”:

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<sup>15</sup> See Austin (2007, 8): “The ‘fraudulent promise’ to return home was, in fact, the most cited ‘cure’ for nostalgia.”

‘Perspective brings significance,’ we say,  
Unhooding our photometers, and, snap!  
What can’t be printed can be thrown away.  
(“Whatever Happened”, *TLD*, CP 74, l. 7-9)

It is by now clear that, if we follow Boym’s distinction between a “restorative” and a “reflective” nostalgia, Larkin’s falls under the latter, critical, and self-conscious type, where reflection allows nostalgia to see and recognize itself for what it is: a direction of the gaze, a form for constructing meaning, the sentiment – almost a sense and, as all senses, easily deceived – of distance. Larkin’s critical nostalgia is built on an awareness that does not neutralize the emotion: they respond to each other as in overtone singing, keeping alive both the grief and the consciousness of the illusory nature of its object.

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