

# Vocations as Codes of Existence and Definitions of Identity in Philip Larkin's 'Livings'

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## **Abstract**

Larkin's 'Livings' survey three occupations as samples tentatively representing existence. Separated by time and vocations, the three people with whom the trilogy concerns itself are a business man in 1929, a lighthouse keeper probably in the early twentieth century, and a Cambridge don between the seventieth and eightieth centuries. The careers of the three personae expose their mental, psychological, and emotional preoccupations and reveal a lot about their worldviews. More importantly, questions of being, existence as well as identity are explored inadvertently in terms of what types of vocations selected and why, and if they meet or fall short of expectations. The poems discuss how the labourers assess their jobs. Contentment and delight or else weariness and disappointment surface as their views are uncovered. Finally, light is turned on the way workers respond to the careers' milieus including people and props.

**Key words:** Philip Larkin, poetry, 'Livings', existence, occupation, vocation, 'Toads', identity, work.

## **المهنة كشيفرة للوجود وتعريف للهوية**

### **مجلة باسرا للبحوث الإنسانية في قصيدة "معاش" لفيليب لاركن**

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## **الخلاصة**

تطرح قصيدة فيليب لاركن (١٩٢٢-١٩٨٥) "معاش" المنشورة عام ١٩٧٤ ضمن مجموعته الأخيرة *الشبابيك العالية* نموذجاً ثلاثياً يمثل الوجود. تبحث هذه القصيدة الثلاثية في وجود ثلاث شخصيات تتفصل عن بعضها زمنياً و مهنيًا. الشخصية الأولى تمثل رجل أعمال في عام ١٩٢٩ ، الثانية حارس فانار في بداية القرن العشرين على الأرجح و الثالثة لأستاذ في جامعة كامبرج بين القرنين السابع عشر و الثامن عشر. تكشف مهن الشخصيات الثلاث الكثير فيما يتعلق بعقلية كل واحد منهم و نفسياتهم و هواجسهم المهنية و العاطفية فضلاً عن رؤيا العالم الخاصة بكل واحد منهم. كما تتناول القصيدة موضوع الوجود و ثيمة الهوية من خلال التطرق بشكل غير مباشر لموضوع الاختيار او عدمه فيما يخص المهن التي تحترفها الشخصيات الثلاث و اذا ما كانت تتماشى مع مستوى توقعاتهم. كما تسجل القصيدة المعايير التي يقيم العاملون على وفقها مهنتهم مظهرة مشاعر الرضا و السعادة او الملل و الخيبة. في النهاية، يتم تسليط الضوء على الكيفية التي يستجيب بها العاملون لبيئة عملهم و بضمنها الناس و الاشياء.

## **Introduction**

Work and labour feature prominently in Philip Larkin's poetry dating back to his juvenilia when he drafted 'Writer' (1941), a poem that explores rather precociously the futile prospects of making of writing a worthwhile career. In his mature collections, work is poignantly present, sometimes directly, in such poems as 'Toads' (*The Less Deceived*, 1955) and 'Toads Revisited' (*The Whitsun Weddings*, 1964), in addition to 'Livings' (*High Windows*, 1974), which all pivot more or less on a dialectic argument of work and employment in opposition to unemployment. Work is also discussed less directly as a subsidiary motif in many a poem such as 'At Grass', 'Naturally the Foundation will Bear Your Expenses', 'Mr Bleaney', 'Poetry of Departures', 'The Explosion', 'Posterity' and 'Aubade' among many others. Overall, work is portrayed as an agent that keeps the human beings sober and assure that their pursuits are realistic and plausible. It is a reminder that existence comes with obligations and people are called upon to honour their vocational commitments. Simultaneously, work is a key to the questions of existence and identity on an individualistic, personal level and whether the job promotes or demotes one's feeling of happiness and pride. It goes without saying that the choices one makes on the occupational level spill a great deal about personality, ambitions, and anxieties.

## **Occupation in Larkin's Poetry: an Overview**

As the six-day a week librarian at Hull University, Larkin (1922-1985) developed certain views regarding work and occupation. He explored the question of employment and its dictates in several poems over his career. An intriguing concern with work surfaced for the first time in 'Toads' (*The Less Deceived*). Then in *The Whitsun Weddings*, Larkin intended 'Toads Revisited' as a sequel and a reappraisal of the earlier views. Larkin added 'Naturally the Foundation will Bear Your Expenses', another poem that makes of work one of its basic pillars. Larkin intended it as a criticism levelled against academics whom he previously flattered in 'Toads' almost a decade earlier, probably in honour of Monica Jones. *The Whitsun Weddings* seems to have work and vocation at its very centre. Besides 'Toads Revisited' and 'Naturally the Foundation will Bear Your Expenses', two more poems at least which are 'Mr Bleaney' and 'Self's the Man' touch lightly on work as an enslavement bringing about no personal reward. 'Faith Hailing' does charity to a charlatan occupation where innate faith and naiveté of the believers combine to create a profitable business to the bogus priest in the poem. 'For Sidney Bechet' glorifies the musical career of a black jazz artist and 'MCMXIV' pays a tribute to the young military. 'Essential Beauty' says a sharp word about the attractions of advertisements and 'Sunny Prestatyn' drops a hint at the brutal exploitation of beauty in the sex industry. 'The Large Cool store' boldly but also tactfully invades the privacy of working classes' boudoirs through exposing their nightwear. In all, *The Whitsun Weddings* endorses a multi-dimensional attitude towards labour.

In *High Windows*, the vocational fever persists resulting in the three



'Livings' poems in addition to 'Posterity', which offers the readers a peep at the world of writing and publication while 'The Explosion' pays homage to the mining industry balancing intellectuals against proletarians. Larkin's later uncollected poems are no less preoccupied with the notion of work and its pros and cons. 'The Life with a Hole in it' (1974) alludes to the benefits of a novelistic career in opposition to a poetical one where the adventurous Kingsley Amis and timid Philip Larkin are the hypothetical representatives consecutively. The same obsession is rehearsed in 'A Letter to a Friend about Girls' in which the novelist of five-hundreds-words a day is envied for being able to divide the year half and half between work and fun. 'Aubade' (1977) makes of work a most welcomed escape; it reverses the order in favour of the six-day a week job which the 'Toads' poems have stringently parodied.

In 'Toads' and 'Toads Revisited', for instance, work as a universal concept is explored. It is metaphorically designated as a slimy toad that squats on the speaker and suffocates him. Like the toad in fairytales, the cumbersomeness and ugliness of work turn to be the life-saving prince charming. It is the perfect means to ward off the *dragons* of vagrancy, poverty, and hunger. In 'Toads Revisited', work is even seen as one's most loyal companion that sees one off to the grave. The bathos of the final stanza is diluted by a faint sense of dignity and contentment that a stable job secures until one passes away. And though the narrator starts the argument against work and the routines it imposes, a paradigm shift takes place in favour of work as the argument heats up. The scepticism of the unpromising beginning gives way to brighter inferences towards the end though the dubious cynicism is retained. The 'Toads' poems give work an outstanding treatment, yet it remains an abstract doctrine and a theoretical assumption. As such, it is discussed within a conceptual rather than practical framework. It is only a contemplated idea, a notion and a hypothesis; to redress the situation, 'Livings' is offered almost two decades later.

### **'Livings': Existence and Identity Crisis**

'Livings' (*High Windows*, 1974) explores a quite different dimension to work, which other poems ignored. Larkin first intended to write a sequence of poems under the title 'Vocations', but later he 'settled on' 'Livings' which 'is more existentially abstract, and lacks any hint of artistic calling' according to Booth (2014: 369). The poems are existentially oriented indeed, but neither abstract, nor inartistic. Larkin opted for a three-fold poem and a monologue-like trilogy that places three people in the focus while they conduct their diverse businesses and each in his occupational locale. The three vocational lines picked to represent humanity vary from the mercantile and lucrative which 'Livings I' advocates, to the bizarre and atypical in 'Livings II' and the academic and intellectual of 'Livings III'. Three historical and vocational reflective nodes are hosted in the poem. making it 'a modern experiment in relativity and points of view'. Serving existential ends, the poems probe the question of identity as well (Stojkovic', 2006: 196). And in so doing, the ascent of 'Livings' from the agronomical sphere to a transcendental one is achieved. To Rowe (2011: 3),





'Livings' 'highlights a philosophical issue by allowing 'an apparent lack of connection between things which ought to be connected'; such a view is validated almost solely by the subject matter which puts together the otherwise bitty trio. In these three more or less furnished vocational storylines, life is epitomized and boiled down to private reflections and assessments, triggered by the daily routines which the three jobs impose. Being 'three mask lyrics' in Rácz's words, the triad allows the business minds of three diverse personae to be invaded and pried open (1995: 144). Thereupon, information is gleaned in regard to their mental calibres and individual identities, which are sounded and measured. As monologues, the poems invest in and retain a private, clandestine air of confessions flowing from people while they are conducting their own businesses. Though seemingly confidential and *entre nous*, the threefold narrative worlds fall into a mini occupational panorama to which almost all humankind relates. The trio operate like 'a triptych' of three integrated panels where 'each gives a compressed, lucid portrayal of a certain way of making a living' (Wain, 1986: 356) and the pros and cons that tag along. The lucidity claimed is highly questionable as Wain seems to be in two minds about the job 'Livings II' portrays and even builds his argument on the assumption that it is a ship steward whose voice is heard. However, he soon revises his views in favour of other vocational interpretations in a footnote (1986: 631).

The poems, in addition, place their major characters in a narrative world of very condensed nature and outline the responses these personae have within their professional territories and in the peculiar register of each job. The occupation of each decides his reaction not only to living in the world, but also blending with, melting in, or even distancing oneself from it. Behind these vocational stances, there is one person that has grown analytical of and critical to the version of living passed over to him so that he found himself, almost trapped, obliged to indulge in and do honour to. As such, the question that is urgently raised is whether one really chooses one's own path and whether choice making itself is iterative or a one-time opportunity, close to reversal or reappraisal. 'Livings I' tackles this area of disturbing thought where the mind overviews the perspective in 1929 with discontentment and weariness.

There is hardly anything interesting in the story of a salesman whose business takes him on boring trips to places where a purely business atmosphere is hardly disguised. To do his business justice, the salesman dons the mask and performs the role perfectly well. Every third month, he has to devote three days to that shire whose name he does not disclose, immerse himself in its ambience, and conduct his almost clownish business. He goes as far as researching the place, reading its local paper for instance, to prepare himself for the part he plays there. He even partakes in its social activities, discussing 'Government tariffs, wages, price of stock' over 'whisky in the Smoke Room' together with 'Clough,/ Margatts, the Captain, Dr. Watterson' (Burnett, 2012: 77).<sup>1</sup> Social events and games are conducted business-like to guarantee professional success

<sup>1</sup> All subsequent references to the poems are from Burnett's edition (2012).



and the salesman obliges mechanically. For the stretch of three days, he forces every fibre in his being to acclimatise or rather be reconciled to this agricultural strip of 'farmers, things like dips and feed' (77). When he pauses to comment on art or rather the pictures that happen to decorate the walls, his 'philistinism', as Everett intimates, surfaces in casually labelling them as 'comic – hunting, trenches, stuff' and then in the sweeping generalisation that 'Nobody minds or notices' (1989: 77). He thinks poorly of his business associates and deems himself as possessing a finer taste; he probably flatters himself, regretting that he is wasting his talents on these uncouth folks. In one sense, being attentive to what escapes the observation of others, he definitely looks above the business circle he makes a living through. Arrogance and conceit are not altogether ruled out as to have sparked his judgments. In another sense, his dissatisfaction with his occupation osmoses to infect the locale, its people and props, hence he pronounces all as distasteful and unsophisticated. Readers may tend to suspect that his is a schizophrenic life style in which the contracted life version of the three-day business trip does not seem to be amiss in any aspect. The only problem, one is apt to conclude, is that he has fallen in the rut and he knows it well enough. The same hotel and the single room he books every time he is on the road, let alone his 'lean old leather case' are, in his view, the inescapable business kit. However, that same professional mentality, which denies himself small changes with regard to his business props entertains doubts as to the emptiness of 'the square' and the 'big sky' that hangs over and 'Drains down the estuary like the bed /Of a gold river' (77). The marginal or even apocryphal world that he briefly inhabits jerks him back to sobriety and awareness which prove to be a rich gold mine:

I drowse  
Between ex-Army sheets, wondering why  
I think it's worth while coming. Father's dead:  
He used to, but the business is mine.  
It's time for change, in nineteen twenty-nine. (p. 77)

It is 1929, that is, eleven years since the war ended, but still war relics survive in or rather penetrate all facets of life, bedding sheets included. The irony deepens for while the poem drops a casual hint about the war, the reader's mind whisks in 'pathos' to the 1929 of the 'impending disaster' (Petch, 1981: 103). The 1929 which appears as if casually dropped 'like an afterthought or Postscript' is also the 'ominous' year of the Great Crash and prelude to the "low dishonest decade" of the 1930s' (Booth, 2005: 132). Being oblivious to the imminent economical crisis, the businessman cursorily revisits his perhaps ex-service in the war or an ex-occupation whose impact imprints on the mind this attitude of restlessness and shiftlessness, hence the ensuing 'wondering' session. Sandwiched between the memories of an ex-occupation and a current unsatisfactory one, he is ironically unaware of the impending depression to take place that same year. Bleak prospects of a potential business change is cursorily speculated as doubts take hold of him. This spasm of scepticism spirals down to questioning the legacy passed to him through his father who founded the

business, charted its maps, and then handed it down to him. As such, vocational decisions were made on his behalf and he was denied or spared the turmoil of choice, trial, and error. Yet, his common sense informs him that he is not robbed of choice altogether; family business is not hereditary and thus can be waived. Present to his mind and hence influencing his conclusions is the 'implicit consciousness of other 'needs' which his current vocation fails to satisfy (Petch, 1981: 103). He is apparently anxious that what he does as a living lacks in the personal signature and that he misses the pride and delight that come with creating one's own legacy.

This awakening, the poem reports, is not only inspired by rubbing one's nose in the sordid reality of being tied to an occupation for which one has lost passion, but also by an upward look at the evening sky, stretching above an empty square, ushering a priceless discovery. Business adventure, like the sky above, tempts the weary businessman and promises new venues and endless harvest if one only makes his mind to embrace change and take a risk. No business hindsight could predict that the change he was contemplating would materialize in 1929 whether he reached for it or not. The poem ends and readers are tantalized by the question whether the fretful salesman would hold on to his father's business in the face of the crisis, soon to befall, or seize the opportunity, venture out of his experience zone and sail free of a business he finds no credit in doing.

'Livings II' is a one hundred eighty degrees shift from I. It switches over to an incompatible sphere where both language and imagery reflect adeptly the vocational difference. The poem, 'written later in 1971, turns back to the sublime, impersonal mode' according to Booth (2005: 168) and invests 'a grim secular asceticism', typical of the profession on which the argument pivots. Lerner (1989: 118) finds the poem as one 'of pure vision' and therefore dispenses with any trappings except those relevant to nature. The five verses of the poem mimicking the tall lighthouse 'in their short line widths and free verse structure', the absence of a coherent rhyme, and the cryptic imagery, all triggered by nothing other than the job which the poem discusses, contribute to setting 'Livings II' apart (Whalen, 1986: 67). As the readers' hindsight adjusts to the merchandising jargon of the opening poem, they are taken aback by the visionary lingo of the second, in assertion of its unpredictability and 'surprisingness' (Wain, 1986: 358).

To begin with, the mental perspective that launches the arguments in the second 'Livings' is a plunge downwards. The speaker darts a look at the water below which constitutes his own professional territory and wonders how 'Seventy feet down/ The sea explodes upwards' (77). The downward view inaugurates the argument, unlike the upward look of the two other 'Livings' which closes the argument. Despite the claustrophobic locus imposed by his job as a lighthouse keeper, his vision is by no means hampered. This prospect from above documents a lofty worldview of a persona that makes a magnificent home of and a living from a lighthouse, very much like the legendary dwellers of ivory towers in their insularity and alienation. He differs in that he does not betray any



ivory tower syndromes other than his fascination with the sea world below and its inhabitants. His aloofness renders him awake to the mysterious presence of the elemental world, its beauty and energy' (Whalen, 1986: 67). This alertness to nature is part and parcel and the corollary of his vocation. The poem has its solitary persona absorbed in the majestic seascape and attuned to the wrathful surfs while he conducts his job with both precision and ecstasy, summoning the Yeatsian 'rejoice!' in response to nature. One is prone to suspect that the watery outrage inspires the joy and thrill in the lighthouse keeper as it perhaps recalls to his otherwise insular attention the hustle and bustle of the world outside his professional zone. Or, a stormy night is a reminder, renewal and assertion of his role as a regulator, guide and guard, a trio on which the marine world relies. Hence, the first stanza betrays a mental attitude of euphoria if not indeed of pride and haughtiness with regard to the occupation, which are absent from 'Livings I' whose persona deliberates on a professional makeover. It also exposes an attitude of security and compatibility in relation to the job props and demands, unlike the persona in the first 'Livings' who emerges as a misfit, pretending otherwise and carrying on a graceless act. Hence, while 'Livings I' relays the inconveniences of an inherited business and perhaps the absence of originality and personal signature, the second 'Livings' emerges as a song of praise and an ode celebrating the vigour and dynamism of a bend of mind, reconciled to the *métier* and a mentality, fully communed with the environment. The latter sense is vividly and energetically present in the second stanza where the lighthouse keeper delights in the props of his vocational world:

Rocks writhe back to sight.  
Mussels, limpets,  
Husband their tenacity  
In the freezing slither –  
Creatures, I cherish you! (P. 78)

This is the voice of 'the disguised platonist' who 'exults in his freedom' in Paulin's view (1997: 173), a freedom which his own choice of occupation has conferred on him. The way he addresses the tenants of his vocational environment makes him sound like a priest offering a pagan prayer to appease a wrathful god and in praise of midget creatures that survive the frothy breakers. As such, the transcendental and sublime attend to and coexist with the professional, that is, grace is in sync with labour. And indeed soon duty calls and he assumes his steering position in the face of the approaching foul weather. The world filtered through his consciousness takes on naturalistic masks and nocturnal presences, which both comply with the tasks assigned to him. Hence, cricket-like, 'Radio rubs its legs,/ Telling me of elsewhere' keeping the keeper posted so that he could perform his job masterly. The same applies to the 'moth world' of the next stanza, drawing a visionary vignette of a world going dark, wild, and ruthless, a perfect combination that entitles him to interfere on the professional level. It seems up to the speaker to light it back to brilliance, order, and security. When the 'loose moth world' strays in the darkness and 'leather-



black waters' is unleashed, the lighthouse keeper finds himself named as the master of the puppet-show hence the elevated perspective of an almost Olympic deity:

Guarded by brilliance  
I sat plate and spoon,  
And after, divining-cards.  
Lit shelved liners  
Grove like mad worlds westward. (p. 78)

This 'manic spasm' to quote Heaney (1997: 28) which these lines betray commune with the coziness and incandescent atmosphere of his oracle-like vocation and habitat. The lighthouse keeper is like Prometheus divining destinies and offering blessings of light and guidance. In so doing, he possesses both 'authority as well as ...mystery' (Petch, 1981: 104), not to mention mastery. His task, to which he does full credit, is to light, regulate the marine chaos, and restore balance and sanity to world-like liners. In a nutshell, this vocation of his is indexical of the inestimable value of an existence that is regarded by the world as marginal, invisible and almost ghost-like. It also exposes a individualistic identity that makes a principle of self-sufficiency and insularity. The job seems to be perfectly tailored to satisfy the needs of an anti-social personality that rejoices in solitude and detachment. In this regard, Booth points to the use of the 'staccato unrhymed trimeters ... to articulate the lighthouse-keeper's fierce anathema on society' (2005: 12) which he nevertheless serves by virtue of his profession from his lofty position.

'Livings III' looks like a one night entry in a journal, or a piece, or a paragraph highlighted from a diary, which keeps record of forgettable meal routines that attend to an academic profession. Wain (1986: 357) reads the poem as 'an engraved illustration to a rich, quirky eighteenth-century novel' though Petch (1981: 103) locates it tentatively a century earlier. The speaker is a subordinate in rank for the reference to the absent 'Master' decides his professional status as early as the opening line. Before long, the central persona in 'Livings III' is assumed to adopt the voice of a Cambridge don, with 'sizar' and 'Snape', supporting the last inference (Wain, 1986: 357). 'Livings III' can not be read without having in mind as well an earlier poem: 'Naturally the Foundation will Bear Your Expenses', which was first published in (1961) before it was collected in *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964). In 'the Foundation', a twentieth century academic describes his tight schedule which makes him fly to the other end of the globe to give lectures. He has to review papers on the plane, recycle his old researches to give a talk here and there, assess a publication house and look forward to greeting 'Professor Lal' who happens to be his 'contact and' his 'pal' (52). The jargon of names 'Comet', 'Berkeley', 'Chatto', 'Whitehall', 'Auster', 'Lal', and 'Morgan Forster' betrays the chaos and pandemonium of a successful modern academic career. Therefore perhaps, Larkin returns to the topic in 'Livings III' *High Windows* ten years later. However, in 'Livings', Larkin acts more cautiously, picking a distant time zone to place his academic within.





If 'Livings' is intended to celebrate a trinity of selves, then this last section with its sophisticated intellectual persona stabilizes the composite so that the poem exposes three disparate facets of human labour, viz, a profitable occupation, an eerie vocation, and an academic career. It is also a trinity of mentalities: the commercial, eccentric/innate, and intellectual though this triple inventory is selective rather than exhaustive. With tongues loosened by the port which 'goes round much the faster', the conversers in 'Livings III' have the topics of the dinner conversation range from the trivial to the serious (presumably legal, anatomical, political, religious) and from prospective business gains and profits to mundane gossip. In all, these are topics often introduced and explained in lectures within the academic milieu, therefore, both the proficiency and resourcefulness are expected. The drink which introduces the talk in the first stanza and boosts it later in 'The wine heats temper and complexion' (15) is a catalyst of garrulousness and token of a thought flux, but also of insobriety. The drink loosens the otherwise academic uptightness though does not entirely eliminate it specially in regard to the topic choice, which remains more or less scholastic. As a result, there is a touch of absurdity and even frivolousness in the way topics are brushed on. The narrator makes a seemingly offhand point of topics being 'raised with no less ease' now that the Master does not preside the table when the reverse is probably true.

The farcicality or flippancy endures even when a legislative query is probed in 'which advowson looks the fairest', a question that invests in the pun on 'looks' and 'fairest'. The same applies to the academic plane. The presumptuous terminological discussion of '*pudendum mulieris*', one may expect, earns a scatological and crude turn despite its gynecological context. The question proper is reserved to a pseudo-political, pseudo-theological area of thought in 'Why is Judas like Jack Ketch' (78). The way the question is phrased betrays inebriation. Jack Ketch, the infamous executioner of the seventeenth century whose brutality is proverbially diabolic is summoned up probably in an attempt to draw character sketches if not proper evaluations relevant to politics, a topic often approached cautiously. The versatile conversation is both indexical of inclusiveness, but also noncommittal, and even indecisiveness, hence the abruptness of topic change. One is tempted to wonder whether the dinner conversation is a residue of the day's lecture schedule or carries more meaning than meet the eye. The topics could be the tips of the intellectual icebergs, alluding to more systematic and elaborate academic research works. By the same token, the way the conversation fares and topics are traded is the litmus test sounding the epistemological directions of the then contemporary academia.

Topics, soon exhausted, start to fluctuate. Like 'candleflames' the conversation has to 'grow thin, then broaden' to prepare for the butler 'Starveling' whose name echoes an impoverished environment whether in a literal or metaphorical sense. The butler along with the 'sizar' of the third verse who occupies the position of a 'bursaried scholar' of some sort 'formerly found in Cambridge University and Trinity College, Dublin' (Osborne, 2014: 242) supplement, though by no means complete, the inventory of academic labour.



The butler is responsible for making sure that the academics are comfortable. As such, the weather necessitates the setting of 'a jordan' 'behind the screen' to save time, the speaker claims, especially since 'The fields around are cold and muddy' (79). At this point, the conversation hits a deadlock and thoughts go bankrupt before wine helps to wrap up the night more or less decently with 'Oath-enforced assertions' flying 'On rheumy fevers, resurrection,/ Regicide and rabbit pie' (79). Once more, the awkwardness of the conversational cocktail is an emblem of a tipsy sub-consciousness and hence the talk verges on bantering. The elitist academics are momentarily off guard and oblivious to their estimable professional status. In addition, the dons' diurnal occupation impinges on their consciousness in such a way that makes an ordinary dinner conversation out of the question. A conversation over a meal is not expected to be so strung up as to look like an academic seminar. Besides, the way topics are bartered and/or leapt over betrays impatience and awkwardness. There is an esoteric element of haste latent with the ease stated earlier being one of the assets of the evening meal. It remains vague whether it is the meal or the conversation that happens to explore academic topics, which the diners/talkers rush themselves out. Like a second nature, the routines and habits of the academic career invade every aspect of the dons' life. Once dinner is over, a sense of liberation correlates with the contemplation of the outside wilderness, close urbanity, and academic props, which is reminiscent of 'Livings' I and II.

The evening meal seems to be the last event to conclude the academic day and a sense of freedom and relief suffuses once the academics are through. Nonetheless, the nightscape, cold and muddy as it is, reflects psyches that are just as shiftless and troubled. Simultaneously, it insinuates the inconvenience or even hostility of the world outside academia. The confines of the scholastic career are burdensome, but also protective against the coldness and muddiness. Therefore, the narrator holds on to the professional milieu that he knows best and feels most comfortable within albeit its fettering protocols. His contemplation betrays no sign of a potential let alone upcoming vocational change. Rather, the contemplation ensuing looks like a jumbled *mélange*, 'A sizar shivers at his study' is on a par with that 'The kitchen cat has made a kill'. All diverse pawns contribute to the sum total of existence which the professional zones illustrates. Under the casualness by which the academic environment is chartered, there is almost an occupational conspiracy to bring down the ethics of academia.

The mind, however, is preoccupied not with the procedures of the world below as much as by the vastness above where 'Chaldean constellations/ Sparkle over crowded roofs' (79). The heavenward perspective of as ancient stellar charts as the ones Chaldean astrologists drew looks like an ideal closure to a mini epic. The galactic reference offers a concise, but pithy synopsis of a cosmos whose elements work in a perfect harmony and stability despite disparity. It also resumes an interest in the extraterrestrial though it does not necessarily locate the speaker within the astrological expertise. It is this trend which sounds unearthly and peculiar that Larkin glides into unannounced with

all due elegance and splendour. In all, this last section redounds to the existential diversity that makes the three 'Livings' pieces bring urbanity, primitiveness, and intellectuality all together within the existential index.

### Final Remarks

Occupations and vocations are hardly poetic and one barely expects to encounter a poem that pays compliment to business. Larkin's poetry does not promote a flattering view of work, yet Larkin seems to find in work a source of inspiration and a medium to assess living as well as an index of identity. It is not only 'how we live measures our own nature' (50) as 'Mr Bleaney' concludes, but also what we do for a living comments on our nature and plumbs the depth of our existence further.

In the three occupations that 'Livings' surveys and assesses, the focal factor is how far the human beings' entire existence is subjected to what they do to earn their livings. Accordingly, being itself is embedded in the choice of a particular occupation and the pursuit of a specific career. Likewise, the individualistic signature, personal touch, and, in short, identity or who one truly is are shaped by the occupational capacity, the dexterity with which the job is conducted, and complacency or its lack with respect to work and career.

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