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Unveiling Philip Larkin's Cultural Reflections in "Going, Going"[1]

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This article examines Philip Larkin's measured belief in the endurance of English culture and his nuanced stance on the interplay between pastoral ideals and consumer modernity. Drawing on close reading and the concept of "heterotopia," it explores how Larkin employs specific spaces—such as papers, books, galleries, earth, and the sea, to reveal the continuity and transformation of English pastoral culture. By focusing on the documentary function of cultural artifacts and the purifying capacities of natural elements, the article demonstrates how these symbols preserve cultural memory and embody pastoral persistence. Through a spatial perspective, this article argues that Larkin constructs heterotopic spaces to mediate between nostalgia for England's pastoral heritage and the realities of modern consumer culture, thereby revealing his tempered faith in cultural endurance.

Keywords: Philip Larkin; pastoral culture; consumerism; continuity; heterotopia;

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Penned in 1972, Philip Larkin's poem "Going, Going" (1974) appears in his fourth poetry collection, *High Windows*. It has garnered considerable scholarly attention and inspired diverse interpretations. Some critics regard it as a "huge hymn to old England" (Motion 580), reflecting Larkin's concerns about the contemporary "unmitigated and steadily intensifying catastrophe" (James 23). Others see it as a "satirical social commentary," showcasing Larkin's unease with an "alien and fragmented society" (Regan 126) and his "revulsion for the materialistic present" (Morrison 256). Additionally, it is seen as an expression of personal sentiments, embodying Larkin's conservative "sense of finality" (Motion 556) and "regressive pastoralism" (Regan 125) concerning England. Regarding its cultural connotations, critics have argued it reflects Larkin's "ominous tone" "of Thatcher" (Hibbett 19) and his "[a]nxieties about a culture seemingly dominated by 'money'" (Regan 136), deeming it his "personal response to a contemporary culture's concerns" (Storey 244). Discussions of the poem's craftsmanship have also emerged, with some suggesting it is a product of "Larkin's fame" and includes "stereotyped attitudes and sentimental clichés" (Swarbrick 144).

Through these meticulous analyses, Larkin's reflections on culture, society, and his own place within them are illuminated, offering avenues for further exploration of his complex ideological stance. Consistent with previous studies, this article explores the poem through a spatial lens, positing that Larkin's narrative strategy of cultural continuity across space is a pivotal aspect for investigation. While the distinctions and contrasts between past and present England are observed as a mutual "counterpoint" (Storey 244), the continuity between them remains an appealing issue for exploration, as J. Ryan Hibbett points out, Larkin has "an abiding reverence for continuity" (18).

Larkin has been regarded as a symbol of the resurrection of English traditions, or Englishness, in part because his poetry maintains a distance from Modernism. His work focuses on English life in relation to specific societal phenomena such as alienation, hegemony, publicness, and issues of agency in post-civil society, through which it offers a sustained critique of twentieth-century British culture. These representations contribute to narratives of cultural identity, distinguishing England from other European nations and the United States (Ebbatson 1–

2). In this respect, Larkin's poetry participates in the tradition of reflecting on cultural questions in the post-war Britain. In "Going, Going," these concerns are embodied in the dynamic conflict between pastoral continuity and modern consumer culture.

Philip Larkin's poem "Going, Going" originated from a commission by Robert Jackson, a Fellow of All Souls and a member of a government working party, and was initially published in his report on the human habitat (*Complete Poems* 908). Upon its public release, the poem gained recognition as one of Larkin's "blankly bleak poems" (Terry 7), serving as a poignant portrayal of England's transformation under the pressures of urbanization and industrialization. Spanning nine stanzas, "Going, Going" vividly juxtaposes traditional English life with the capitalist culture that characterizes modern England. A closer examination of the poem's structure and content reveals three significant contrasts within stanzas two, three, and eight. Lines such as "In the papers about old streets / And split-level shopping, ..." (ll. 7–8); "As earth will always respond" (l. 14) and "The tides will be clean beyond" (l. 17); and "There'll be books," and "it will linger on / In galleries; ..." (ll. 46–47) serve as poignant reminders of old England, playing a pivotal role in the poem by offering a stark contrast to contemporary cultural landscapes. These contrasts prompt questions about Larkin's narrative strategy. Do they merely highlight English culture's desolation, or do they serve other functions? What roles do the symbolic elements of "papers," "books," "galleries," "the sea" (l. 16), and "earth" play in reflecting Larkin's attitudes toward English culture? Larkin's concluding sentences in the last stanza— "Most things are never meant. / This won't be, most likely" (ll. 49-50) are also intriguing. These two sentences soften the force of Larkin's critique of cultural transition, suggesting a melancholic endurance, a resigned acceptance that cultural transition is inevitable. Through a close reading and the concept of heterotopia, this article addresses these questions by analyzing the cultural elements embedded in "Going, Going".

The notion of "heterotopia," derived from the Greek "hetero" (another, different) and "topos" (place), was later developed by Michael Foucault to designate real sites that "simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (24) society. While utopias gesture toward aspirational societies, "a dream to be enjoyed" and "a vision to be pursued" (Levitas 1), heterotopias are real places that possess the capacity to contest the societal space. In his essay

"Of Other Spaces," first delivered as a lecture in 1967 and translated into English in 1986, Foucault identifies two principal forms: crisis heterotopia or heterotopia of deviation. Crisis heterotopias, he explains, are sites in which individuals in primitive societies exist "in a state of crisis" (24), whereas heterotopias of deviation, modern replacements for disappearing crisis heterotopias, are spaces reserved for individuals "whose behavior is deviant" relative to prevailing social norms (25). Foucault concludes that the heterotopic space exists in every culture where its function changes throughout history, and it juxtaposes in "a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible," links to "slices in time" such as the break, the eternity, and the suspension of time, has a system of opening and closing which "both isolates them and makes them penetrable," and has relation to all remaining spaces (25–27). His theorization of heterotopia resonates with contemporaneous inquiries into the social production of space beyond mathematical exploration. For instance, Henri Lefebvre's concept of "the production of space" illustrates how spatial experience is shaped by capital and capitalism (10). At the same time, Foucault's heterotopology of space–time relations, which serves as Edward Soja's "springboard for a critique of a prevailing historicism in modernist critical thinking" (155), informs Edward's transdisciplinary notion of "Thirdspace," a spatial framework that is open to all binarisms. Thus, the concept of heterotopia is especially productive for examining contradictions inherent in modern social space.

Philip Larkin's urban poems broadly register anxieties about England's cultural transformation in the postwar period, particularly the shift from pastoral traditions to urban modernity, and voice a cautious critique of capitalism alongside a restrained faith in cultural continuity. In "Toads Revisited" (1962), for example, Larkin depicts individuals who, unable to "get free from capital" (Marx 764), find themselves confined within material structures even as they seek pastoral substitutes such as manicured city gardens. In "Essential Beauty" (1964), he exposes capitalism's cultural hegemony through the billboard advertising that infiltrates the space of the city pub, formerly "a social centre for the community" (Clarke et al. 133), converting it into a site of commodified consolation. Yet Larkin's work also affirms the resilience of Englishness. In "Show Saturday" (1974), named after the agricultural festival in Bellingham, he portrays a temporary rupture in capitalist culture and employs grass as a symbol

of cultural renewal. This persistence of Englishness is also reflected in the later poem "New Eyes Each Year" (1979) in which he turns to books and shared memories to suggest English identity continues, even as modernity reshapes it. Consistent with this tempered belief in cultural endurance, "Going, Going" encapsulates Larkin's critique of shifting English identity while also expressing a guarded hope for the persistence of traditional values within heterotopic spaces.

On a temporal level, Philip Larkin's "Going, Going" depicts profound societal transformations in modern England. It illustrates citizens' relentless pursuit of material wealth against a backdrop of capitalism. Larkin traces a linear progression from the pastoral landscapes—where "louts" could leisurely "climb / [s]uch trees" (ll. 4–5)—to the urban sprawl of capitalist England, with "high-risers" (l. 11) and cars. Villagers become modern city dwellers, frequenting places like the "M1 café" (l. 20) or appearing "[o]n the Business Page" (l. 24), demanding "[m]ore houses", "more parking" (l. 22), "more caravan sites", "more pay" (l. 23), and more profits. Larkin predicts that if these changes persist, England will become the "[f]irst slum of Europe" (l. 40), leading to the demise of England.

Nevertheless, on a spatial level, symbols such as "papers," "books," "galleries," "the sea," and "earth" emerge amid this space-time turbulence, functioning as heterotopic spaces that accommodate both pastoral and consumer cultures. These spaces reflect Larkin's multi-layered attitudes toward this cultural transition, as Smaranda Spanu claims, "[t]hese intermediate spaces thus take shape as outlets" (216). More broadly, Larkin demonstrates that as time advances, the spaces evolve from wildness to confined areas and then return to wildness again, a cyclical pattern mirroring England's spatial evolution and individuals' pursuit of property. Initially, rural inhabitants migrate to cities in search of economic opportunities; later, driven by profit, the "spectacled" entrepreneurs relocate their factories to "unspoiled dales" (l. 29) once again.

Within this narrative of spatial transformation, these heterotopias embody Larkin's constrained reflections on culture and society. For him, the documentary function of "papers," and the capacity to maintain landforms through purification of "the sea" and "earth" can preserve elements of pastoral heritage while showing the dynamics between pastoral and consumer cultures. Larkin consistently emphasizes these heterotopic functions throughout the poem, particularly in stanzas two, three, six and eight.

In the cultural transformation, "papers," "books," "galleries," "the sea," and "earth" serve as relatively stable spaces that evoke urban residents' memories of the vanished life. Larkin first mentions papers in the second stanza, suggesting their power to raise "alarms" (l. 6) about the "old streets / [a]nd split-level shopping" (ll. 7–8); then he evokes "[t]he shadows," "the meadows," and "the lanes" (l. 44) images immortalized in "books" and "galleries," which re-emphasize the preserved pastoral way of life documented in papers. In stanzas three and six, Larkin portrays "earth" and "the sea" as possessing an almost eternal capacity to purify the "mess" (l. 15) and "filth" (l. 16) generated by inhabitants' daily activities and industrial production. These natural elements offer solace to the exhausted modern citizens whenever they "get near the sea" (l. 31) or "the land" (l. 34) in summer. Through this, Larkin presents that these heterotopic spaces, distinct from ordinary ones, are perceived as more stable and inclusive amid the erosion caused by modernity.

Taken together, these symbols, emblematic of Larkin's emphasis on the continuity of pastoral life, fall into two categories. Firstly, there are the cultural artifacts such as "papers," "books," and "galleries," collectively representing the memories of English culture. Secondly, "earth" and "the sea," these two natural elements, metaphorically embody the resilience of pastoral existence, and its entanglement with the consumerist ethos.

Larkin asserts that "papers" serve as heterotopic spaces where past and present intersect, functioning as bridges that connect cultural experiences across different eras. This idea is mirrored in the poem's structure, where Larkin explicitly divides his emotional responses of England into past and present. The first stanza begins with Larkin's regret over his mistaken belief that "[t]here would always be fields and farms" (l. 3) in villages, as indicated by the ominous "alarms" signalling their disappearance as documented in the "papers". He then delves into memories of how people once lived pastoral lives in fields, farms, and villages within the same stanza, before shifting to a vivid depiction of modern England's cultural landscape.

This structural division is subtly reinforced through the enjambment between stanza one and stanza two. Enjambment, a literary device frequently employed in poetry, refers to a phrase or sentence that runs over different lines without a pause. It is often used to emphasize words or phrases at the beginning or end of lines and to illustrate the continuity and fluidity of the poem.

In "Going, Going," the enjambment involving "papers" serves as a bridge connecting the depiction of pastoral life in the first stanza with the portrayal of modern capitalist elements in the third and fourth stanzas. This enjambment highlights the textual space where traditional pastoral life and modern commodified life collide. The sentence spans three segments: the first concludes stanza one, while the second and third are in stanza two, leading toward the description of England's urban areas. The phrase "In the papers,", positioned at the beginning of stanza two, serves as an emphasis on the transition. The enjambment reads:

> Such trees as were not cut down;
> I knew there'd be false alarms
> In the papers about old streets
> And split-level shopping, but some (ll. 5–8)

The papers, serving as the bridge between pastoral landscapes and urban transformation here, shift the readers' focus from the countryside to the ensuing chaos of modern life in the poem. The verdant "fields" and "farms" are replaced by looming "bleak high-risers". The words "alarms," "old streets," and "split-level shopping" succinctly encapsulate papers' documentation of past life. Following Larkin's scathing critiques of society's materialistic pursuits—yearning for more space, prestige, profits, land, and travel, he revisits the space of cultural artifacts in the eighth stanza, accentuating its cultural significance in a more tangible manner. In contrast to his previous depiction, Larkin now delves deeper into its role as a chronicler of traditional English life. Opening with Larkin's pessimistic vision of the future: "And that will be England gone" (l. 43), this stanza harbors an optimistic hope that "[t]here'll be books; it will linger on / [i]n galleries" (ll. 46–47). Representative of pastoral culture, entities like the "shadows," "meadows," "lanes," "guildhalls," and "carved choirs" are projected to endure amidst the onslaught of "crooks," "tarts," "concrete and tyres" (l. 48).

Larkin's preoccupation with paper, particularly "books," is a recurring theme in his body of work. He contends that while not all books may be entirely satisfactory, "it's certainly difficult to think of a better symbol of civilization" (*Required Writing* 86). This emphasis on the importance of paper is also evident in his other compositions, such as the poem "'New eyes each year'" (*Complete Poems* 259), where Larkin vividly portrays books as a space where "youth and

age" (l. 5) intersect and "[o]ld eyes renew" (l. 4). Concluding the eight-line poem with the sentence, "In this house join, /Minting new coin" (ll. 7–8), Larkin underscores the role of paper in amalgamating and reconstructing, akin to their capability depicted in "Going, Going".

Accordingly, the primary function of heterotopic space such as "papers," "books," and "galleries" in Larkin's narration is their capacity to preserve a culture of restraint through words, pictures or other historical artifacts. Despite the poem's overall pessimistic tone, Larkin's belief in these spaces' function as repositories of culture persists within the spatial narrative. This persistence reflects a relatively tempered faith, offering a compromise between the advance of consumer culture and the retreat of pastoral life.

Diverging from the documentation of a culture of restraint in "papers," "books," and "galleries" across time, "the sea" and "earth" serve as heterotopic spaces that embody the resilience of pastoral culture and the interplay between constraints and fetishism in this poem. On one hand, Larkin employs synecdoche, using earth and the sea to represent pastoral culture in England. The natural features they embody closely resemble Larkin's concept of pastoral way of life, including solid coastlines, mountains, flora and fauna of sea and land, and an enduring wildness in contrast to urban areas. These features, particularly emblematic of England, resonate with Larkin's nostalgic appreciation of old England. Larkin employs the line "Things are tougher than we are" (l. 13) in stanza three to suggest that while "things" like earth and the sea can largely maintain their characteristics, "we"—the inhabitants—are far more susceptible to the influences of consumer culture. Earth and the sea themselves, integral to pastoral culture, epitomize the natural landscapes of England. They endure over time and remain intimately linked to the rural lifestyles depicted by Larkin, encompassing elements similar to trees, farms, fields, estuaries, dales, and meadows.

On the other hand, the perpetual ebb and flow of the sea and the natural decomposition of earth are metaphorized to reflect pastoral culture's potential for purifying "mess" and "filth" of modern life through its dynamic processes. It is through this "purification" that earth and the sea can cleanse the mess and maintain their geomorphic features, akin to pastoral life's inherent ability to rejuvenate amid the amalgamation of various cultural elements, enabling its continuity in the river of time.

Besides, Larkin explores the concept of "continuity" through the examination of the relationships between inhabitants and the "sea" and "earth". In the third stanza, Larkin depicts the actions of citizens toward earth and the sea, and commends the resilience of these natural elements. Here, the actions of individuals represent culture of consumption, while earth and the sea, as symbols of pastoral culture, embody their cleansing abilities. With assertions like "As earth will always respond / However we mess it about" (ll. 14–15) and "filth in the sea, if you must: / The tides will be clean beyond" (ll. 16–17), the tensions between consumer culture and pastoral culture are demonstrated in the conflicts between people's careless littering and the environment's capacity for purification. Yet, much like how earth and the sea cleanse detritus from consumer society to maintain their geomorphic features such as waters, capes, marshes, forests, and so on, pastoral culture has the capacity to absorb inhabitants' consumer practices while retaining its fundamental simplicity. In stanza six, subsequent to Larkin's poignant critique of workers' ceaseless quest for wealth in the preceding verse, this stanza illustrates their retreat from the tumult of urban life to briefly savouring the tranquillity and serenity bestowed by earth and the sea.

From these two perspectives, Larkin's tempered faith in the continuity of pastoral culture in England resurfaces. Larkin acknowledges that a pastoral ethos persists much like earth and the sea. It suggests that pastoral life and its spokespersons—earth and the sea—will endure indefinitely as havens for solace.

However, Larkin also raises doubts about their lasting vitality in the respective stanzas. In stanza three, he raises doubts about the sustainability of this cultural assimilation through rhetorical questions: "But what do I feel now? Doubt? / Or age, simply?" (ll. 18–19). Here, the poet-narrator engages in self-reflection regarding the ongoing conflicts between the two kinds of lifestyle. In the sixth stanza, Larkin directly confronts this question, expressing, "For the first time I feel somehow / That it isn't going to last" (ll. 35–36), even as "the sea" and "the land" are "left free" (l. 34) to purify whatever humanity has imposed upon them. Larkin candidly admits that pastoral culture may not possess the intrinsic power to perpetually triumph over the erosion of capitalist culture without external power, underscoring once more his uncertainty regarding the dynamics between these two cultural forces.

Thus, it can be observed that the symbols "papers," "books," "galleries," "the sea," and "earth" serve as cultural repositories and embodiments in "Going, Going". They signify the persistence of pastoral culture amidst consumer culture, which reflects Larkin's tempered belief in the enduring presence of pastoral culture, while he acknowledges the inevitable conflicts between past pastoral living and modern consumerism. Amid this transformation, Larkin emerges as a conscious participant in England's evolving cultural landscape. These symbolic spaces, serving as intermediate heterotopias, provide a site where conflict between past and present, between pastoral living and consumer modernity, is mitigated.

Concerning the second question, Larkin's adoption of a tender tone in the final stanza isn't surprising, as it precisely mirrors his intermediate stance between pastoral and consumer culture. His final remark— "Most things are never meant." (l. 49), resonates with his earlier narrations of the symbols, revealing his compromised emotions on the encroachment of capitalist culture. He concludes that the fusion of capitalism is "most likely" (l. 50) "never meant"; rather, it is inevitable processes and cannot be stopped by individuals considering capital's reproduction. Instead, his concern lies more in the excessive "greeds" (l. 50) and "garbage" that are "too thick-strewn" (l. 51), prompting people to "invent / excuses" (ll. 52–53) to justify excessive materials and unrestrained consumption as necessities. Larkin's answer to this question resonates his earlier discussions in the preceding stanzas. He accentuates the role of cultural artifacts, together with earth and the sea, in traditional pastoral culture while acknowledging the reality of the fusion of pastoral and consumer cultures; he emphasizes the purification enacted by pastoral life brought by earth and the sea, yet simultaneously questions its perpetual validity if citizens keep overlooking the continuity of Englishness.

To conclude, as an embodiment of Larkin's reflections on cultural transformation under capitalist modernity, "Going, Going" not only expresses his lament that individuals have shifted from rural dwellers to wage workers but also reveals that, although such sweeping cultural changes are irresistible, English culture retains a certain tenacity. This resilience, symbolized by earth and the sea, offers a subtle counterforce to the erosion brought about by consumerism and capitalist hegemony. At the same time, Larkin acknowledges that this quality of Englishness is neither everlasting nor automatically effective. In response to this fragility, he turns to cultural

artifacts as the narrative of cultural memory and a resistance to capitalist modernity. These heterotopic spaces thus function as a break of time, mediating between opposing cultural forces in modern spaces. From this perspective of heterotopia, the dynamics of power and the suspension of cultural conflicts within urban public space become vividly apparent.

Moreover, the poem also serves as Larkin's attempt to awaken its readers. "Going, Going" may be understood as a "cultural apparatus" (Sinfield 30) through which Larkin unveils the reservations of pastoral culture amid inevitable cultural conflicts. As a publicly presented piece, the poem carries a social mission: to draw attention to the conditions of modern life and thereby influence readers' cultural consciousness and civic engagement. Beyond its elegiac expression of cultural decline, the symbolic elements within "Going, Going" reflect Larkin's melancholic endurance, his belief that English pastoral life, though steadily diminishing in the context of postwar reconstruction and economic recovery, will endure as cultural memory within heterotopic spaces. While this analysis illuminates Larkin's cultural contemplations, a more extensive examination of his reflections on capitalist modernity remains an important direction for further study.

Going, Going

I thought it would last my time –
The sense that, beyond the town,
There would always be fields and farms,
Where the village louts could climb
Such trees as were not cut down;
I knew there'd be false alarms

In the papers about old streets
And split-level shopping, but some
Have always been left so far;
And when the old part retreats
As the bleak high-risers come

We can always escape in the car.

Things are tougher than we are, just
As earth will always respond
However we mess it about;
Chuck filth in the sea, if you must:
The tides will be clean beyond.
– But what do I feel now? Doubt?

Or age, simply? The crowd
Is young in the M1 café;
Their kids are screaming for more –
More houses, more parking allowed,
More caravan sites, more pay.
On the Business Page, a score

Of spectacled grins approve
Some takeover bid that entails
Five per cent profit (and ten
Per cent more in the estuaries): move
Your works to the unspoilt dales
(Grey area grants)! And when

You try to get near the sea
In summer …
It seems, just now,
To be happening so very fast;
Despite all the land left free
For the first time I feel somehow

That it isn't going to last,

That before I snuff it, the whole
Boiling will be bricked in
Except for the tourist parts –
First slum of Europe: a role
It won't be so hard to win,
With a cast of crooks and tarts.

And that will be England gone,
The shadows, the meadows, the lane
The guildhalls, the carved choirs.
There'll be books; it will linger on
In galleries; but all that remains
For us will be concrete and tyres.

Most things are never meant.
This won't be, most likely: but greeds
And garbage are too thick-strewn
To be swept up now, or invent
Excuses that make them all needs.
I just think it will happen, soon. (Larkin, *Complete Poems* 201–02)

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