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Parodic traits in Larkin's "I remember, I remember"[1]

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In her introduction to *A Theory of Parody. The teachings of twentieth-century art forms,* Hutcheon suggests that parody be reconsidered in terms both of its form and its function due to the change of focus that has gone from a 19th c. Romantic quest for aesthetic merit based on originality understood as the unique manifestation of the individual genius to a 20th c. search of instructional value given by a new aesthetics of intertextual practises at the basis of the production, reception and circulation of texts. In this new context, parody needs to be redefined as a true genre, making use of but not identifying itself either with irony or with intertextuality, and having both its own structural identity and its own hermeneutic function. In order to account for its complexity, Hutcheon offers her dual formal/pragmatic perspective to approach it. She provides various definitions of 20th c. parody that tackle it from different angles, and in doing so she discloses its numerous faces: parody is defined as one the major forms of modern self-reflexivity, inter-art discourse, and imitation characterized by ironic inversion. It is also described as a sort of dialogue with the forms of the past that recirculates rather than immortalize but not necessarily ridicules, as repetition with critical distance, as a modern encoding which establishes difference at the heart of similarity, as a stylistic confrontation that ironically plays with multiple conventions: in short, a hybrid and double-voiced mode of discourse seen as an integrated structural modeling process of revisiting, replaying, inverting, and transcontextualizing previous works of art, where, on the one hand, conservative and innovative forces converge to

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signal the artist's desire to refunctionalize the forms of their predecessors to their own needs, and, on the other hand, there is a dynamics of processes of encoding and decoding both its structure and the vast scope of its intent (Hutcheon, 1-29). This paper aims at exploring parodic traits--in Hutcheon's terms--in "I remember, I remember" by Philip Larkin (1922-1985).

An English poet, novelist, and critic, Larkin became a leading figure of "The Movement," term to describe a group of British poets during the 1950s (Donald Davie, Kingsley Amis, D. J. Enright, and Thom Gunn, among others) who addressed everyday British life in plain, straightforward language, and reacted against the vogue enjoyed at that time by Dylan Thomas' New Romantic poetry. "I remember, I remember" was first published in the poetry collection *The Less Deceived in* 1955, ten years after Larkin's first collection, *The North Ship*. The colloquial and down-to earth nature of the poems of this second collection would give life to Larkin's characteristic tone in portraying a skeptical view of life and would help him gain wide readership. The title *The Less Deceived* alludes to Ophelia's words in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. She has been told by an apparently insane Hamlet he loved her once, only to hear from him afterwards he did not. Conscious of the cruel deception she has been prey to, she exclaims. "I was the more deceived" (Shakespeare, 812). Larkin's parodic strategy of inverting Ophelia's words already gives us a clear sense of his cynic view of the world around him and of his own life, imprinting in the poems from this collection (not just in "I remember, I remember" but also notably in many others, like "Poetry of Departures" or "Toads," for instance) an uncompromising self awareness and an intense self-critical honesty. The purpose of his title choice, as he explained his publisher, was to "give a certain amount of sad-eyed (and clear-eyed) realism" to the collection (qtd. in Chatterjee 113). His refusal to resort to illusion, deception, and sentimentalism as sources of hope and meaning in life seduces the reader and invites us to do away with that Romantic simplistic optimism which separates us from reality, from the naked truth of life and death. The speaker in "I remember, I remember" tells us of a train journey he takes with his friend, and of its unexpected stop at Coventry--his birth place. The view and sudden recognition of his half-forgotten hometown makes him exclaim he was born there, and triggers an embedded musing on his childhood, which is full of cynicism and bitterness. At his partner's remark: "You look as though you wished the place in Hell," he retorts

"I suppose it's not the place's fault," and concludes: "Nothing, like something, happens anywhere."

It is interesting to point out how Larkin makes use of his poem to establish "difference at the heart of similarity" (Hutcheon 8), ironically inverting "I remember, I remember" by Thomas Hood (1799-1845) and "Fern Hill" by Dylan Thomas (1914-1953). Thomas Hood published his popular "I remember, I remember" in a clear Romantic vein in 1827. Divided into four stanzas which start with an echo of the title in a refrain, the poem presents us with a nostalgic speaker who longs for his childhood and enumerates his sweet memories of the past only to contrast them with the present, when adulthood has erased everything that was pure, innocent and happy about it, concluding in the last verses that:"… now 'tis little joy/ To know I'm farther off from Heaven /Than when I was a boy." Larkin's poem, on the contrary, careful omits the word "remember," enumerates a series of pleasant experiences he has never had, and reminds us with his last verses that nothing, or at least nothing worth writing about, has happened in his childhood. On the other hand, in his *The Movement: English Poetry and Fiction of the 1950's,* Blake Morrison asserts that it was also "Fern Hill," Dylan Thomas' most popular poem, what he had in mind when he wrote "I remember, I remember," and that his intention was to revise it in the way other poets from "The Movement" had revisited Thomas' poetry, like for instance D. J. Enright's "On the Death of a Child" contesting "A Refusal to Mourn," and Davie's "A Baptist Childhood" alluding to lines from "Fern Hill" itself (Thomas' idyllic childhood celebrated at the beginning of his poem: "Now as I was young and easy…/…and happy as the grass was green" is replaced by Davies' gloomy upbringing: "When some were happy as the grass was green/ I was as happy as a glass was dark"). "Fern Hill," published in 1946 and full of rhapsodic lyricism, is a poem whose speaker evokes his childhood in the farm with exuberant images and dreamlike, pastoral metaphors which are reminiscent of scenes from the Garden of Eden, and concludes the poem mourning his lost youth, when he was not conscious yet of his being "in the mercy of his [time] means." It is Morrison's argument that, as Thomas' work gained popularity in the early fifties, so did The Movement's aversion to it grow, and that their case against him was "crucial to the development of their own artistic program" (Morrison 146). It just makes sense then that, belonging to this generation of writers who felt the need to contest Thomas' widely acclaimed and

admired sentimentality, Larkin *did* actually have "Fern Hill" in mind when writing "I remember, I remember." Even when there are no explicit instances of intertextuality in Larkin's poem that might allude to Thomas' poem directly, the parodic nature of the text, following Hutcheon, can be seen in the questioning and refunctionalization of conventions of different kinds. In this case, the Romantic principle of idealization of one's childhood and the subsequent view of adulthood as the inevitable corruption of that pure and perfect stage of life one should forever long for is reverted in favor of a more realistic—yet ironic—outlook on one's early years. Larkin convinces us that children's life can also be uneventful, boring, and gloomy. Indeed, the Romantic subscription to overjoyed, passionate rhetoric as a means to pay tribute to that "angelical" period of our lives is turned upside down with Larkin's unpoetic language to speak about an uninteresting childhood, and by doing so from his stance of critical distance he proposes a new aesthetic and poetic model.

More specifically, the poem can be explored in terms of the "critical distance" (Hutcheon, 6) from the target texts in the reversal or problematization of the nature of particular formal, stylistic, and semantic aspects. Both in Hood's and Thomas' poem, a succession of vivid images that memory brings the speaker is followed at the end by a pseudo-philosophical closure of the poem: both reflect on the harmful effect of time a one grows up: children follow time "out of grace," and lead them to be farther and farther "off from Heaven." Larkin's poem also follows a similar arrangement, but with the opposite purpose: a succession of memories of experiences he has never had end up with the conclusion that nothing worthwhile has really happened, and in doing so, he reveals a sudden insight into the general condition of the modern man in his disillusionment and meaninglessness.

In terms of poetic structure, we can see how Larkin departs from the traditional ballad-like construction in Hood's poem and the evident internal and end rhyme in "Fern Hill" to display a complex pattern of his own. Both the ballad--so frequently used by the Romantics and bearing reminiscence of a simpler and happier past, and of idyllic pastoral life--and Dylan Thomas' regular meter and rhyme provide a sense of unity and wholeness which suits the description of an ideal past that has been lost. In order to speak about his unhappy past, Larkin instead chooses an intricate and complicated pattern in sets of three end rhymes which are repeated and permuted in four nine-line

arrangements which do not coincide with the division of the poem into stanzas (abc, cba, abc, def, fed, def, ghi, ihg, ghi, jkl, lkj, jkl).

On the other hand, the tone in the target texts is also evidently subverted in Larkin's poem. While the former is clearly sentimental and nostalgic, the latter is highly ironic, caustic, and sarcastic. Both Hood and Thomas furnish their poems with profuse tropes, whereas Larkin is careful to keep his register conversational, deprived of figurative language, and parodies their vivid metaphorical language by transforming them into clichés by use of inverted commas: Phrases like "have your roots"?, "mine," "really myself" and "all became a burning mist" clearly question and attack those sentimental celebrations of one's past in those poems written after a Neo Romantic fashion, which, according to The Movement, were burdened with an excess of nostalgia and mysticism.

It is also fascinating to see how, besides subverting formal and stylistic aspects of the target texts, Larkin's "I remember, I remember" also questions their view of time and memory. Both for Hood and Thomas, the process of growing up is portrayed as a source of decisive change towards decay: it entails the loss of purity, innocence, and happiness of the "lamb white days." Although time is always there behind our backs to prove we will eventually grow out of innocence and die, it is not until we grow up that we become aware of its power to lead us "out of grace," in Thomas' terms, or out of our "childish ignorance," closer to Heaven, in Hood's terms. In Larkin's view, instead, there isn't anything necessarily "happy" or "innocent" about childhood. We do not need to grow up to taste the bitterness of life: children may not be closer to heaven than adults, and they might happen "…not to invent/ blinding theologies of flowers and fruits." Our innocence can be crushed at an early age. Not only can children experience depression but also "have no splendid family" to run to, and their first romantic encounters might not be pleasant or might not happen at all: "…I never trembling sat/ Determined to go through it; where she/ lay back, and "all became a burning mist.""

For Hood and Thomas, the power of memory is undeniable; vivid images, sensations, and experiences from the past use it as a vehicle to haunt us. Hood makes use of his refrain to emphasize the act of remembering in a fashion that reminds us of the Christian credo, as if it were itself a statement of belief, a quasi-religious experience. On the other hand, Fern Hill's succession of imagery in the speaker's remembrance of

his childhood on the farm takes the form of an uninterrupted flow of memories linked by the repetition of "and" and frequent enjambments, giving readers the impression memory is a powerful force which can transport us to the past as if they went through a trance. Unlike Hood's and Thomas' speakers, Larkin's speaker is far from being "possessed" by memories from the past. He has to make sure the town where the train has stopped "was still the town that had been mine," and does not even remember "which side was which," or from where exactly his family departed for their holidays. Yet, once he has "the whole place rally charted," the ingenious use of the negative to enumerate those events which never happened challenges the view of memory in the target texts: we are not to be tricked by an idealized version of the past, of which the Romantic memory is responsible. If we are to be honest with ourselves, true memory-- and not the illusion of it--might bring unpleasant remembrances as well.

The treatment of place in relation to time in Larkin's poem can also be seen as a way to refunctionalize the target texts. In Hood's poem, the sequence goes from the house in the first stanza to the garden and its flowers in the second one to the "fir-trees dark and high" of the forest at the end. A parallel can be drawn between the treatment of location and the stages in a person's life, starting in the intimacy of home and going further and further into the outer world. Thomas, though more loosely, seems to do something similar: memories go from the "apple boughs about the lilting house" to the "apple towns," to the barns, and to the hay fields, only to go back to the "gay house" in the penultimate stanza. In both cases the speakers experience their memories, as it were, from "the inside." They can see the sun "peeping in at morn" at Hood's window, and are "young and easy," and "happy as the grass was green" in Thomas' farm. It is the familiarity with which they speak about home that takes it for granted, naturalizing it. Larkin's decision to stage his speaker's musings at a train stop, remembering his childhood from above the platform, from inside the train, leaves his hometown "on the outside." The vividness with which the past is remembered in the target poems gives it an absolute nature and rules out the possibility of its being questioned. Instead, Larkin's emphasis on the transience of life by means of the figure of the train, which might stop by but never really stays, allows the speaker to cast a critical eye on his childhood, which is seen, as if it were, from the outside, at a distance. This perspective might be said to be enhanced by the fact that the speaker's memories are enclosed,

narratologically speaking, in a wider frame: the present. In the target poems, the reader is transported to the past from the very beginning. Even when both poems make references to the present, the starting point is the past, and the present is measured up to it. It is to be noticed that Hood's speaker chooses to allude to his unhappy present at the end of the two first stanzas but ends up the other two dwelling in the past again, while Thomas' speaker, after waking "to the farm forever fled from the childhood land," is lost in the past again to finish the poem, when time held him "green and dying," and he was still unaware of his being imprisoned by it, and "sang in my chains like the sea." Larkin's poem, in turn, starts with the train stopping at Coventry, and the speaker, whose remembrances are triggered by the place, come by chance, take some time to come back to the speaker's memory, and are abruptly interrupted by a comment from his travelling partner: The reader is reminded that we cannot dwell in the past for ever. The present will call us back, the train will follow its course to new stations, and life goes on.

If the purpose of Larkin's poem is parodying the Romantic vein in which the target poems have been written, then the recurrent Romantic association between nature and the speaker's "pure lost childhood" could not be overlooked, and it has not. In Hood's poem, everything the speaker remembers besides his house is an element of nature: the sun, the flowers in the garden, the robin, the breeze, the summer pools, and the fir-trees. Days have the perfect timing: The sun "never came a wink too soon/ nor brought too long a day," and the speaker feels identified with nature: "and though the air must rush as fresh/ to swallows on the wing; /My spirit flew in feathers, then." Likewise, Thomas's poem is even more striking as to its speaker's connection with nature. He is "prince of the apple towns," and "honored among foxes and pheasants," and the whole poem is an ecstatic celebration of the natural world, where the speaker, delighted, evokes the trees, the daises, the barley, the sun, the calves, the hills, the holy streams, the fields, the stars, the owls, the moon, the nightjars, the horses, and the dew. It is distinctive of Romantic poetry for nature to stand for the freedom lost to the restraint of adulthood, for the vitality surrendered to physical decline, for genuine pleasure which has given way to adulthood's weariness and, in the case of Hood's poem, even to the desire of death itself. Larkin skilfully subverts this notion as he uses his poem to refuse the connection both between nature and emotion, and between nature

and an idealized childhood. From his verses it is clear the speaker experiences no sacred communion with the natural world, and this lack of connection is directly linked to the positive emotional experiences he has missed: the insight of "blinding theologies of flowers and fruits" he has never had in the garden, the chance of being "really myself" he has never had in the farm, or his first romantic encounters on the bracken which either never happened or were never pleasant.

Beyond the target texts, there is still another interesting parodic trait to explore in "I remember I remember," and it is how it becomes "a form of self-reflexivity, a form of inter-art discourse" (Hutcheon, 2). Hutcheon asserts that parody "self-consciously and self-critically points us to its true nature" (69), "imitating art more than life" (27), and Larkin highlights the self-reflexive nature of his poem in different ways. As we have seen, from the very beginning, the reader is offered a borrowed title for the poem, which immediately brings to mind Hood's famous poem, and the nostalgia for past time, full of purity, innocence, and happiness pervading the target text is shattered as we read along, and ultimately inverted as we come through the enumeration of all those wonderful experiences the speaker did not have. Of course, if we agree with Morrison in his assertion that it was also Thomas' "Fern Hill" Larkin had in mind when writing the poem, the reflexive quality of the poem calling for an awareness of other possible target texts behind it is indeed remarked. Yet, the reflexive nature of parody, according to Hannoosh, goes beyond highlighting its nature as a text about other texts: "it rebounds upon itself, calling itself into question as it does the parodied work." Although her definition of parody for her is narrower than Hutcheon's in terms of its intent, as the former tends to associate the comical feature in it, Hanoosh's insight into parodic works comes to enrich Hutcheon's in this respect, for, as she says, the self-reflexive aspect has not been sufficiently explored. Her point seems to be simple enough: if parody provides a retelling of the target text, it paves the way at the same time for other texts to parody it in turn. The mechanisms laid bare for the refunctionalization of the target text are simultaneously offered to prove every text, including of course the parody we are reading, can be further parodied. It implies in the desacralization of the target text the potential of every literary text to be parodied. In Larkin's poem, the excessive sarcasm and bitterness used to refer to his childhood makes the speaker's interlocutor exclaim with us: "You look as though you wished the place in Hell!" Yet, we are not fully

trapped by the "tragedy" of his childhood. We know deep down this exaggerated bitterness invites further parodying. Part of the effectiveness of the poem lies in a hyperbolic device to call into question Larkin's own version of Hood's poem, naturally triggering further versions and perspectives from where to view childhood and evoke childhood memories.

On the other hand, the fact that the speaker can easily be associated with Larkin, the self reflexive nature of the poem is further stretched: In parodying a Romantic view of childhood he parodies his own upbringing. He not only mocks Thomas Hood and Dylan Thomas: he mocks himself. Indeed, it is believed his childhood was as uneventful and boring as the poem describes. He was known to be quite sarcastic about his life as a child in Coventry, and it is no coincidence that he makes sure his homeland is directly referred to in the poem. As a matter of fact, if all those joyful moments he mentions as never experienced are taken out, the fact that his birth place is Coventry is roughly the only bit of information about his childhood we are granted in the poem. Several of his poems bear the bitterness towards his childhood and family life: He asserts in "Poetry of Departures" (1955) that "We all hate home/ And having to be there;" later on he entitles one his poems "Home is so sad" (1964), and starts his "This Be the Verse" in 1971 with those unforgettable lines: "They fuck you up, your mom and dad/ They might not mean to, but they do." From an autobiographical fragment written by Larkin in the 1950s we can have a clear picture of what he thought about his "dull, pot-bound, and slightly mad," home: so much so as to make him assert "I never left the house without the sense of walking into a cooler, cleaner, saner and pleasanter atmosphere" ("The Larkins"). He goes on to describe an extremely shy father, a resentful, self-pitying mother, and an unhappy sister, whose difference in age with him made him feel he was an only child. He describes himself as a boy in his "private world, disregarding what awkward overtures he [his father] could make," and "handicapped by an embarrassing stammer." ("The Larkins"). In short, he goes as far as to say 'When I try to tune into my childhood, the dominant emotions I pick up are, overwhelmingly, fear and boredom." ("The Larkins"). Evidently, the childhood remembered in the poem is quite close to Larkin's. However, faithful to his style, he is very far from dwelling on self-pity. He does not view his childhood as a tragedy: "Nothing, like something, happens everywhere." The critical distance Hutcheon speaks about takes a further twist here,

moving from the target text to the speaker's past, which happens of course to be Larkin's as well. As for his career as a poet, he also gives room in his poem to mock his beginnings as a writer, when

> "…my doggerel
>
> Was not set up in blunt ten-point, nor read
>
> By a distinguished cousin of the major
>
> Who didn't call my father There
>
> Before us, had we the gift to see ahead"

Yet, Larkin's self-parody has to be read carefully: The highly artistic structure he displays in his poem undercuts his blunt self-description as a second-hand poet, giving his own self-mockery an ironic turn, and probably also mocking those who did not believe in his potential as a writer.

All in all, Larkin's "I remember, I remember" can be perfectly explored in its parodic nature. On the one hand, the Romantic view of childhood proposed in the target texts Hood's "I remember, I remember" and Thomas' "Fern Hill" is problematized both in terms of particular formal, stylistic, and semantic aspects and, more importantly, in terms of theme as well, mainly by means of the ironic reversal of the treatment of time, one's past, memory, place, and nature. On the other hand, self-parodic traits traced in the poem lead readers to draw their attention not only to the reflexive nature of the poem aiming at itself, but also, and more notably, to the association between the speaker and the author in the face of autobiographical evidence. With a poem full of his usual sarcasm, irony, and self-awareness, Larkin has once again masterfully showed us the other side of the coin, a bath of realism against the illusive and idealistic Romantic outlook on life he despised so much.

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