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Philip Larkin and the Stanza

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Abstract. Philip Larkin, one of England's finest poets among the generation that came of age during World War II, maintained a strong interests in the formal features of verse throughout his career. This article marks the first comprehensive overview of his highly varied and frequently original use of one such feature, the stanza. A set of tables provides overall data about the relative frequency of different stanza lengths – in his four published poetry collections, in poems that he either published or planned to publish but did not appear in one of those collections, and in the unpublished verse. He turns out to have been a strikingly innovative master of stanza form. If many poets rely heavily on the quatrain as their favored stanza, Larkin makes that only one of several stanza lengths that he turns to regularly. More importantly, he composes stanzas in innovative and imaginative ways. His forty sonnets – only eight of which appeared in his four collections – reveal a variety of rhyme schemes and, occasionally, unusual placement of the breaks between portions of the sonnet. In other poems, the rhyme schemes are often irregular, making the rhyme scheme difficult to detect, particularly in those cases when he employs highly approximate rhyme. Much of his verse is also marked by frequent enjambement, even between stanzas. He occasionally links his stanzas and sometimes creates a rhyme scheme that has a different number of lines than the actual stanza length, resulting in markedly complex compositions. In all, Larkin regularly uses his stanzas to highlights key aspects of a poem's meaning, while the intricacy of many stanza structures forces his readers to consider poems more intently.

Keywords: Philip Larkin, English poetry, stanza, sonnet, rhyme, enjambement

I. Introduction and Some Statistics

Although Philip Larkin (1922–1985) published only a modest amount of verse during his lifetime, many in England came to regard him as one of the finest poets – if not the finest – of his generation. Robert Evans, after reviewing the response to Larkin from the mid-1950s through the next decade, concluded that "As the 1960s ended, Larkin had become England's favourite living poet"

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(2017: 27). If anything, his renown only grew during the following decade. Alan Bennett said that when what turned out to be Larkin's last long poem, "Aubade", was published at the end of 1977 "I remember it being something of an event: you asked friends if they'd seen it. It was what it must have been like in the nineteenth century when poetry was news" (2015: 200). Larkin became a rather controversial figure during the decade following his death, when the publication of his letters (Larkin 1992) and then a biography by one of his literary executors (Motion 1993) brought to light unattractive sentiments and behavior on his part. Yet the poetry itself has remained highly regarded. James Booth begins his study of Larkin's life and work by stating outright that "Larkin is, by common consent, the best-loved British poet of the last century" (2014: 1). The poems, while frequently dark, have attracted wide admiration for Larkin's power of observation and his ability to address lofty matters through a probing exploration of everyday detail and happenings.

While such aspects of his verse as meter, rhyme and stanza form may not make as immediate an impression as his subject matter, they are an intrinsic part of his poetic craft. In a 1964 interview, Larkin (2001: 21), along with noting that some of his poems lacked meter and rhyme, stated "I think one would have to be very sure of oneself to dispense with the help that metre and rhyme give and I doubt I really could operate without them". Nearly a decade later, in a letter to Barbara Pym, he was more specific about the reasons for writing traditional verse: "rhyme & metre are such helps in concentrating one's effects and also in evoking an emotional atmosphere" (Larkin 1992: 490). More broadly, he has said, "At any level that matters, form and content are indivisible" (Larkin 1983: 69). As these remarks indicate, Larkin placed a high value on the formal qualities of verse, and the great majority of his poems reflect that concern. His interest in rhyme extended beyond the qualities of the rhymes themselves to the recurrent patterns of rhyme that appear in stanzas, which, as we shall see, reflect as high a level of artistry as other formal features of his verse. Granted, few people return to his poems because they fondly recall the structure of a particular stanza. However, for Larkin, as for many a poet, a poem is a complex construct of many elements, with a full appreciation of the work requiring awareness of not just the content but also the means of expression. To date, Larkin's use of stanzas has received only sporadic attention. Some studies (e.g., Timms 1973, Booth 2014) include perceptive observations about Larkin's stanzas when discussing individual poems, and there have also been at least a couple of articles (Gill 2019, Miyauchi 2002) devoted to subsets of the stanzas that Larkin employed.[1] The

[1] Although Miyauchi (2002) refers to "rhyme style" in his title, the article focuses as much if not more on the stanzas in a selection of Larkin's poems. To date that piece has offered the

purpose of this essay is to offer a more comprehensive overview of Larkin's use of stanzas, with special attention to their variety and, in many cases, originality.

An obstacle when approaching this topic is the lack of research devoted to the repertoire of formal features in other English poets, and in particular those poets – such as Auden, Yeats, and Hardy – who were among those influencing Larkin at various stages of his career.[2] It is thus difficult to draw definite conclusions as to how much Larkin followed his own path and how much he might have relied on his predecessors. As we shall see, at least one of his stanza forms directly imitated Auden, and others may well have been inspired by Hardy. However, the absence of detailed studies devoted to most English poets allows for only sporadic observations about his practice in comparison to that of others. The focus here, therefore, will be primarily on the breadth of stanza types found in Larkin's own poetry and their contribution to its excellence, with only very occasional reference to other poets.

First, a few definitions. Central to the very notion of stanza are the features of division and repetition. That is, for a poem to be stanzaic it should contain one or more divisions into groups of lines, and these groupings are repeated, with the number of lines regulated. The description and categorization of poems by stanza type – say, quatrain or octet – may at first seem to be an easy task. However, length is not the only significant feature of a stanza. A given stanza may be written in one or another meter, the number of possible rhyme schemes increases exponentially along with the length of the stanza, and partially rhymed as well as unrhymed stanzas are hardly uncommon. In some languages, such as Russian, poets pay careful attention to the clausula – the number of syllables at the end of the line, beginning with the rhyme vowel. Thus, a quatrain with lines rhyming AbAb (with a feminine or two-syllable clausula in the odd lines and a masculine or one-syllable clausula in the even lines) is perceived as different from a quatrain rhyming aBaB.[3] A poem may be

most wide-ranging discussion of Larkin's technique in constructing his stanzas. In addition to Gill's article, comments on Larkin's sonnets are to be found in Regan (2019: 330–337).

[2] The impact that these three poets had on Larkin has long been noted. He himself has stated that Auden's verse informed his earliest writing, then for a period of three years in the mid-1940s he was under the sway of Yeats, and finally, from 1946 on, the the most important figure for him became Hardy (Larkin 1983: 28–29). He said of becoming acquainted with Hardy's poems: "I was struck by their tunefulness and their feeling, and the sense that here was somebody writing about things I was beginning to feel myself" (Larkin 1983: 175).

[3] For the most part I will use lower case letters to indicate rhyme schemes, but in those few cases when Larkin throughout a poem distinguishes the various kinds of clausula, "a" is used for masculine rhyme, "A" for feminine, and "A′" for dactylic rhyme (that with a three-syllable clausula). I designate unrhymed lines by "x".

monostanzaic (with each of the four features repeated exactly from one stanza to the next) or heterostanzaic (where one or more features vary). Then there are traditional stanza types, such as the sonnet, *terza rima* and triolet. Of these, the tables below distinguish only the sonnet, which is by far the most frequent such stanza that Larkin employed. The very few poems in other traditional forms are grouped with the rest possessing the same stanza length (e.g., *terza rima* is counted along with other three-line stanzas).

Differentiating between stanzaic and nonstanzaic poetry can present its own set of problems. For categorizing Larkin's poems, I have followed the conventions set forth in an article devoted to Russian verse (Scherr 1999). Brief poems (those with no more than eight lines) that are not divided into stanzas appear in a distinct category: "short verse". As a result, an eight-line undivided poem rhyming ababcdcd falls under "short verse", while another eight-line poem consisting of two quatrains, each rhyming abab is stanzaic. Although the difference may only seem to be typographical – whether or not there is a space dividing lines four and five – I follow the poet's preference in determining if a work employs stanzas. Similarly, longer poems that do not have spaces to demarcate stanzas are listed as "nonstanzaic" even if the same rhyme pattern (say, abba) is repeated throughout. Poems divided into irregularly-sized sets of lines are also considered to be nonstanzaic. Certain poems, which may border on nonstanzaic, contain groups of lines differing in length, but – typically because of similarities in the rhyme scheme – these groups exhibit a regularity that suggests a stanzaic impulse in their organization. These are termed "quasi-stanzaic". While those appear as a separate category in the tables below, the emphasis in this article is on those works that are clearly stanzaic.

Just four slim volumes of Larkin's poetry were issued by publishers during his lifetime. His first book, *The North Ship*, came out in 1945 and contained poems primarily written during 1943–1944, though a 1966 edition of that book added a poem, "Waiting for Breakfast", from 1947. The collection that first brought him wide recognition, *The Less Deceived*, appeared in 1955; except for two poems from 1946, all its contents date from the early 1950s. His other two books were similarly delimited in terms of chronology. Everything in *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964) was written between 1953 (represented by a single poem) and 1963, while *High Windows* (1974) contains poems from the period 1964–1973. When works grouped under a single title reveal different stanza structures, I have regarded them as separate poems. Thus, the five items appearing under the title "The North Ship" in the volume of that name are counted as five poems, not one. Even so, these four books contain a total of just 123 works.

Larkin also put together two collections that were not formally published. *In the Grip of Light* was compiled by 1948 but then rejected by several publishers.

Of its 25 poems – mostly from 1945–1946 (that is, after those found in *The North Ship*) – seventeen did not appear in any of the four published volumes. In 1951 he privately printed *XX Poems*, which included five that did not appear in his books. Then there are some 34 additional poems that he published only in journals. Adding in these works results in a total of 179 poems that he published or at least felt were worthy of appearing in a collection.[4]

Finally, there is the unpublished poetry, which exceeds that which did appear in print by some margin. His complete verse (Larkin 2012) includes nearly 200 additional works just from his early writing (1938–1945), poems from subsequent years that he either did not complete or chose not to publish, and various occasional verse, much of which comes from his correspondence.[5] I have somewhat arbitrarily included only a portion of the items that were in his letters, since they are typically brief and not stanzaic. Had I incorporated all such work in my tables, the amount of "short verse" among his unpublished poetry would be greater for the period 1946–1984 in Table III, but there would not be a significant effect on the relative number of different stanza lengths.

Anthony Thwaite has claimed "that the earliest poems which strike his [Larkin's] characteristic note and carry his own voice were written in 1946" (Larkin 1989: xv). He goes on to present poems written between 1946 and 1983 first, with the pre-1946 poems (including almost all those from *The North Ship*) in a later section. While some of the earlier poems seem worthy of the later Larkin, the great number of works from 1938 through 1945 that he chose not to publish served as a poetic apprenticeship and add little to his reputation. For that matter, on more than one occasion he also expressed strong doubts about the quality of his first book, *The North Ship*, with its reliance on poems from the early 1940s.[6] Following Thwaite's example, I have placed the unpublished poetry dating from after 1945 in its own category, with Table III showing a further divide between the very earliest verse, written when Larkin was just 16–18 years old, and that between 1941 and 1945, which includes the years when all the poems in the first edition of *The North Ship* were created. While an argument can certainly be made for considering only those items that Larkin himself felt

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4 For the information in the preceding paragraphs, I am largely indebted to Andrew Thwaite's introduction in Larkin 1989: xv–xxiii.

5 I have made frequent use of the extensive commentary that Archie Burnett has supplied for the poems in this volume.

6 For instance, in 1965 he remarks to an editor at Faber and Faber, which eventually published the second edition of *The North Ship*, that the poems in that book "are such compete rubbish, for the most part, that I am just twice as unwilling to have two editions in print as I am to have one" (Larkin 1992: 374).

worthy of appearing in print, surveying the full range of his verse reveals more about his development as a poet and also incorporates some fine works that for whatever reason he either decided not to publish or left unfinished.

Table I. Stanza Types in the Four Published Volumes[7]

Stanza form:	*The North Ship*	*The Less Deceived*	*The Whitsun Weddings*	*High Windows*	Totals:
2-line	–	–	–	–	–
3-line	–	3 (48)	4 (48)	3 (61)	**10 (157)**
4-line	4 (32)	4 (84)	5 (116)	6 (92)	**19 (324)**
5-line	3 (35)	6 (141)	3 (45)	2 (50)	**14 (271)**
6-line	3 (42)	3 (72)	5 (126)	5 (156)	**16 (396)**
7-line	2 (28)	1 (21)	1 (14)	2 (85)	**6 (148)**
8-line	6 (156)	2 (56)	9 (256)	4 (136)	**21 (604)**
9-line	1 (18)	1 (63)	–	1 (36)	**3 (117)**
10+-line	1 [11] (33)	–	3 [10, 10, 16] (30, 80, 32)	1 [12] (48)	**5 (223)**
Sonnets	5 (70)	1 (14)	–	2 (28)	**8 (112)**
All stanzaic	**25 (414)**	**21 (499)**	**30 (747)**	**26 (692)**	**102 (2352)**
Short verse	4 (26)	1 (8)	–	–	**5 (34)**
Quasi-Stanzaic	3 (62)	2 (42)	1 (22)	–	**6 (126)**
Nonstanzaic	4 (62)	5 (87)	1 (10)	–	**10 (159)**
Total	**36 (564)**	**29 (636)**	**32 (779)**	**26 (692)**	**123 (2671)**

The raw data for the four published volumes reveal a striking diversity in Larkin's choice of stanza types (see Table I). In addition, from one book to the next a consistently growing portion of the poems are written in stanzas, until by *High Windows* all of them are. As Ernst Häublein (1978: 23) has noted, the quatrain is the favored stanza of poets writing in any of the European traditions. For example, a survey of stanza forms employed by representative

[7] The first number in each box shows the number of poems; the number in parentheses gives the number of lines. Larkin occasionally has one of more extra lines at the end of a poem, so that the number of lines is not always evenly divisible by the stanza length. For instance, "I Remember, I Remember" in *The Less Deceived* contains 36 lines: seven five-line stanzas, along with an extra line at the end. The numbers in square brackets for the "10+-line" stanzas represent the actual lengths of the stanzas in the poems being referenced.

Russian poets over two centuries has shown that nearly two-thirds of the stanzaic verse employed quatrains (Scherr 2014: 34, appendix). In Larkin's case, though, quatrains only account for less than 1/5 of the stanzaic poems (19 of 102) and even appear in slightly fewer poems than do eight-line stanzas. Six-line, five-line and three-line stanzas are also well represented (with some of the three-line stanza poems written in or based on *terza rima*). If the frequency of seven-line stanzas is not particularly high in absolute terms, Larkin nonetheless employs this relatively uncommon form more often than most poets and furthermore, as we shall see, creates some unique combinations with stanzas of that length. Stanzas of more than eight lines are rare in modern verse. Granted, the nine-line Spenserian stanza (ababbcbcc) has continued to find favor with some poets, but Larkin's three poems with nine-line stanzas in the four volumes instead employ rhyme schemes of his own invention. Of the poems from these volumes written in still longer stanzas, two contain ten lines and one each have 11, 12 and 16 (!) lines. Examining the number of lines (rather than the number of poems) in each stanza length reveals that, on average, poems with shorter stanzas have fewer lines and those with longer stanzas have more. For instance, the nineteen poems in four-line stanzas average about seventeen lines, those in six-line stanzas just under 25 lines, and the works in eight-line stanzas nearly 29. The eight sonnets suggest an interest in that form, but it is worth noting that five of them come from *The North Ship*, suggesting that his interest in sonnets dates primarily from his earlier period. One form absent from the collections is the couplet, a stanza that Larkin did not use in any of his published verse.[8]

Since the quantity of poems in each volume is small, it is necessary to be cautious in generalizing about the differences between them. Nonetheless, a few features stand out. *The North Ship*, the one book with poems from what Anthony Thwaite has termed the time before Larkin found his voice as a poet, differs from the others in several respects. Not only does it contain a relative abundance of sonnets, but it also lacks any three-line stanzas, is the only

[8] As mentioned above, to the best of my knowledge similar studies for the poets whom Larkin most admired do not exist. However, even a glance at the works of Yeats, Auden and Hardy reveals that all three, like Larkin, used a wide variety of stanza forms and did not rely heavily on quatrains. An examination of one book by Hardy (*Satires of Circumstance, Lyrics and Reveries, with Miscellaneous Pieces*, 1914, as published in Hardy 2001: 301–423) shows that fewer than a third of the 106 poems are in quatrains, along with sixteen poems in six-line stanzas, twelve each in five-line and eight-line stanzas, and ten in three-line. The collection even has seven poems in the relatively uncommon seven-line stanzas and three in nine-line. Only a half-dozen of the poems appear to be nonstanzaic or quasi-stanzaic. Larkin's broad range of stanza lengths can thus also be found in English poets he admired, but the complexity and variety of forms within each length employed by him are distinctive.

collection with a significant number of short poems, has more nonstanzaic verse than the other collections, and its stanzaic poems are somewhat shorter (averaging 16.8 lines, as opposed to the mid 20s in the three later volumes). At certain periods, perhaps not surprisingly, Larkin tends to favor a particular stanza length. Nearly one-third of all his stanzaic verse in *The Whitsun Weddings* employs eight-line stanzas, while *The Less Deceived* has more poems in five-line stanzas than any other length, even though they are overall only his fourth most widely used stanza in his books of verse.

Table II. Unpublished Poems from Planned Collections and Journal Publications[9]

Stanza form:	*ITGOL; XX Poems*	Journals 1938–1945	Journals 1946–1984	Subtotal	Four Volumes	Totals:
2-line	–	–	–	–	–	–
3-line	–	1 (75)	1 (11)	**2 (86)**	10 (157)	**12 (243)**
4-line	4 (60)	2 (40)	4 (80)	**10 (180)**	19 (324)	**29 (504)**
5-line	4 (50)	–	1 (25)	**5 (75)**	14 (271)	**19 (346)**
6-line	3 (48)	2 (36)	1 (18)	**6 (102)**	16 (396)	**22 (498)**
7-line	–	–	–	**–**	6 (148)	**6 (148)**
8-line	3 (152)	–	3 (64)	**6 (216)**	21 (604)	**27 (820)**
9-line	–	2 (45)	–	**2 (45)**	3 (117)	**5 (162)**
10+-line	–	–	1 [10] (50)	**1 (50)**	5 (223)	**6 (273)**
Sonnets		6 (84)	–	**6 (84)**	8 (112)	**14 (196)**
All stanzaic	14 (310)	13 (280)	11 (248)	**38 (838)**	102 (2352)	**140 (3190)**
Short verse	–	–	5 (26)	**5 (26)**	5 (34)	**10 (60)**
Quasi-Stanzaic	2 (58)	–	1 (10)	**3 (68)**	6 (126)	**9 (194)**
Non-stanzaic	6 (118)	2 (30)	2 (62)	**10 (210)**	10 (159)	**20 (369)**
Total	**22 (486)**	**15 (310)**	**19 (346)**	**56 (1142)**	**123 (2671)**	**179 (3813)**

[9] The first column represents the seventeen poems from *In the Grip of Light* and the five from *XX Poems* that were not published in any of Larkin's four books. Two of the seventeen and one of the five did appear in journals, but they are counted in this column rather than with the journal publications.

The remainder of his poetry that was either published in journals or intended for the collections *In the Grip of Light* and *XX Poems* (and not subsequently published elsewhere) does not markedly change the picture (see Table II). Considering that there are just 56 such poems, the range of stanzas remains impressively broad, especially given that only 38 of them – a significantly smaller percentage than in the four published volumes – are clearly written in stanzas. Once again, no one type clearly stands out: nine of the poems are quatrains, six-line stanzas appear in seven of the poems, and eight-line stanzas in six, while five employ five-line stanzas. A further six poems are sonnets, but all are from the pre-1946 journal publications, again emphasizing that the bulk of his interest in that form came early. Perhaps the most notable feature is the increased percentage of nonstanzaic poems: if only 10 of the 123 poems in the four collections are nonstanzaic, here they appear with more than twice the frequency (10 of the 56). Similarly, short poems (5 of 56) occur at twice the rate as in the four books (5 of 123), and, unlike the sonnets, these all come from his later period (in fact, three of the five were written after *High Windows*, his last collection, was published), indicative of an increased tendency to write short works toward the end of his career.

The first three columns of Table III provide figures for the works during each period that were neither published nor intended for publication in either *In the Grip of Light* or *XX Poems*. The fourth column gives totals for each stanza length within these poems, the fifth column reproduces the last column in Table II, while the final column in Table III shows the totals for each stanza type in all the poems by Larkin examined for this survey. Tables IV and IVa, to allow for a greater focus on the four published books of verse, compare just the works that appeared in those volumes with the works that were neither published nor intended for publication. As Table IV makes clear, his four volumes contain a higher percentage of stanzaic verse than does his unpublished poetry, with Table III revealing that the specifically nonstanzaic poems were most frequent during the early years of his career (1938–1945). The unpublished poems from his post-1945 writing, like those published only in journals during that time, reflect his proclivity for writing poems with fewer lines, despite a handful of long works. Not only does he come to write much short verse (especially among the occasional works that appeared in his letters), but even the stanzaic poems that remained in his notebooks are relatively brief: the 24 poems in quatrains average a little over 15 lines, the seven in five-line stanzas just over twelve (!) lines, and even the eight in eight-line stanzas average only 23 lines Table III, third column). Contrast these numbers with the three volumes that he published from 1945 on: there the total of fifteen quatrains averaged 19.5 lines, the eleven poems in five-line stanzas 21.5 lines,

and the fifteen with eight-line stanzas 29.9 lines. Overall, the works that Larkin did not publish were more likely to be composed in quatrains: nearly a third of the stanzaic poems, as compared to less than a fifth in his books of poetry. A correspondingly lower percentage of eight-line stanzas appears in the unpublished verse. While the absolute numbers are small, the unpublished verse also displays a tendency to employ stanzas with an odd number of lines less frequently. Interestingly, while Larkin wrote sonnets throughout his career, he became ever more selective in publishing them. Of the 28 sonnets that he composed before 1946, he published eleven (six in periodicals, five in *The North Ship*), or just under 40%. From the late 1940s on, he wrote another twelve sonnets but published just three (or one-fourth) of them (one in *The Less Deceived* and two in *High Windows*.

Table III. Unpublished Poems versus Published in Collection or Journals

Stanza form:	1938–1940	1941–1945	1946–1984	Subtotal	Collection/ or Journal Publication	Totals:
2-line	2 (14)	–	1 (12)	**3 (26)**	–	**3 (26)**
3-line	3 (48)	5 (66)	6 (81)	**14 (195)**	12 (243)	**26 (438)**
4-line	22 (500)	16 (360)	24 (370)	**62 (1230)**	29 (504)	**91 (1734)**
5-line	8 (170)	5 (101)	7 (85)	**20 (356)**	19 (346)	**39 (702)**
6-line	12 (354)	13 (258)	11 (246)	**36 (858)**	22 (498)	**58 (1356)**
7-line	3 (91)	2 (63)	1 (28)	**6 (182)**	6 (148)	**12 (330)**
8-line	6 (253)	8 (304)	8 (184)	**22 (741)**	27 (820)	**49 (1561)**
9-line	–	–	1 (29)	**1 (29)**	5 (162)	**6 (191)**
10+-line	5 [3:10, 2:12] (108)	1 [20] (40)	3 [10, 11, 13] (212)	**9 (360)**	6 (273)	**15 (633)**
Sonnets	11 (154)	6 (84)	9 (126)	**26 (364)**	14 (196)	**40 (560)**
All stanzaic	**72 (1692)**	**56 (1276)**	**71 (1373)**	**199 (4341)**	**140 (3190)**	**339 (7531)**
Short verse	3 (17)	14 (88)	31 (185)	**48 (290)**	10 (60)	**58 (350)**
Quasi-Stanzaic	4 (93)	4 (79)	5 (73)	**13 (245)**	9 (194)	**22 (439)**
Non-stanzaic	14 (253)	25 (475)	10 (122)	**49 (850)**	20 (369)	**69 (1219)**
Total	**93 (2055)**	**99 (1978)**	**117 (1753)**	**309 (5726)**	**179 (3813)**	**488 (9539)**

Table IV. Frequency of Verse Types in Four Volumes versus Unpublished Poems

Stanza form:	Four Volumes	Percentage of Total	Unpublished	Percentage of Total
All stanzaic	102 (2352)	82.9% (88.1%)	199 (4341)	64.4% (75.8%)
Short verse	5 (34)	4.1 (1.2)	48 (290)	15.5 (5.1)
Quasi-Stanzaic	6 (126)	4.9 (4.7)	13 (245)	4.2 (4.3)
Nonstanzaic	10 (159)	8.1 (6.0)	49 (850)	15.9 (14.8)
Total	123 (2671)	100.0 (100.0)	309 (5726)	100.0 (100.0)

Table IVa. Relative Frequency of Stanza Lengths in Four Volumes versus Unpublished Poems

Stanza form:	Four Volumes	Percentage of Total	Unpublished	Percentage of Total
2-line	–	–	3 (26)	1.5% (0.6%)
3-line	10 (157)	9.8% (6.7%)	14 (195)	7.0 (4.5)
4-line	19 (324)	18.6 (13.8)	62 (1230)	31.2 (28.3)
5-line	14 (271)	13.7 (11.5)	20 (356)	10.1 (8.2)
6-line	16 (396)	15.7 (16.8)	36 (858)	18.1 (19.8)
7-line	6 (148)	5.9 (6.3)	6 (182)	3.0 (4.2)
8-line	21 (604)	20.6 (25.7)	22 (741)	11.1 (17.1)
9-line	3 (117)	2.9 (5.0)	1 (29)	0.5 (0.7)
10+-line	5 (223)	4.9 (9.5)	9 (360)	4.5 (8.3)
Sonnets	8 (112)	7.8 (4.8)	26 (364)	13.1 (8.4)
All stanzaic	102 (2352)	100 (100.1)	199 (4341)	100.0 (100.1)

What might all this mean? During his early period, his poetic apprenticeship, he falls back with greater frequency on nonstanzaic verse. That early period in general and the unpublished poetry throughout his career show him relying relatively heavily on the quatrain, that most common of stanza lengths, as well as on the familiar form of the sonnet. However, those poems that he regarded as suitable for publication, especially during the mature portion of his career, reveal a definite proclivity for less typical stanza forms, such as those with an odd number of lines – and for rhyme patterns that are highly unusual as well as sometimes unique. The distinction between the published and unpublished verse is far from absolute. Even among the early poems that never found their

way into print during his lifetime, Larkin sometimes makes the structure of his stanzas a prominent feature, occasionally borrowing complicated rhyme schemes from other poets or experimenting with unusual combinations of his own devising. In his later verse, he more regularly made his stanza forms a key component in many of his best poems, as a result becoming ever more rigorous in their selection and construction.

The following examination of Larkin's stanzas begins with the one traditional form that he used often: the sonnet. Even though he published just three sonnets after 1945, he wrote a sufficient number of them throughout his career to provide a window into both his early and subsequent use of stanza forms. This section is followed by an examination of his shorter stanzas, containing from three to six lines, where the space for innovation is somewhat limited but Larkin nonetheless comes up with some impressive innovations. The latter part of this article contains analyses of his seven- and eight-line stanzas and then, as a group, those containing more than eight lines. Along the way I note a few of Larkin's metrical predilections and comment on his rhyming practice, including the approximate rhymes that at times make it difficult to distinguish the structure of his stanzas. In choosing illustrative poems, I favor his last three volumes of published verse, which contain the vast bulk of the poems on which his reputation rests. However, to provide a more complete picture of how he utilized stanzas, reference is made as well to some of his earlier poetry, as well as to unpublished works from the latter part of his career.

II. The Sonnets

In the only article to date devoted totally to Larkin's sonnets, Patrick Gill (2019) suggests that his engagement with that form had a determining effect on his poetry. The poet found it necessary to "strain against not only the sonnet's most prominent structural features but also against the readerly expectations they engender in order to thwart the sonnet's drive towards resolution" (2019: 94). To an extent, this comment could apply as well to what Larkin does with other stanza forms, where he frequently tends to subvert norms. In Gill's reckoning (2019: 86) there is a total of thirty-two sonnets, whereas I have counted forty – though one or two of my instances deviate far enough from the classical form that their inclusion can be considered dubious. In any case, Larkin composed an impressively large number of sonnets, mostly written during the earlier years of his career. While Gill is especially concerned with thematic matters and the ways in which Larkin develops his arguments, he also makes

important observations regarding the sonnets' formal features. In particular, he notes that Larkin not infrequently experimented with the form of the sonnet from the start, and that those experiments account for a large percentage of the sonnets from the early period that he deemed worthy of publication.

Thus, from the beginning Larkin was interested not just in form but also in manipulating form, whether to defy the existing norms or simply for the sake of invention. One of his first two published poems is a largely conventional Shakespearean (or English) sonnet: "Winter Nocturne" (1938; Larkin 2012: 99), with the rhyme scheme ababcdcdefefgg. While he also has other poems from the late 1930s or early 1940s based on the Shakespearean model, the majority of his sonnets consist of variations on the Petrarchan (Italian) sonnet, which has the classic form abbaabba in the octet and a sestet with some pattern of cde rhymes. Poets writing in English, owing to its paucity of ready rhymes, have often used four rhyme pairs in the octet (e.g., ababcdcd or abbacddc) followed by the sestet.[10] Although "Winter Nocturne" adheres precisely to the Shakespearean pattern and Larkin's Petrarchan sonnets often employ its archetypal 8+6 structure, he quickly became more adventurous in his approach, frequently deviating from either model. At the same time, except for a few aberrant lines, he essentially maintains a traditional feature of the sonnet: the use of iambic pentameter.

His playing with the form of the Shakespearean sonnet appears in "So through that unripe day you bore your head..." (1943–1944; Larkin 2012: 20), one of the five sonnets included in *The North Ship*. A space divides the poem into groups of ten and four lines, so that a break occurs in the middle of the third quatrain: ababcdcdef / efgg. Rather than set off the final couplet, Larkin has a strong enjambement connecting lines 12 and 13 ("[...] and can be faced / Indoors"). Also evident is Larkin's early experimentation with approximate rhyme. It requires a moment's study to realize that the end words of the last six lines (belief, past, safe, faced, hour, winter) rhyme in the sequence efefgg. The unpublished "Schoolmaster" (1940; Larkin 2012: 162) is divided into groups of seven, three, and four lines. The exactly rhymed final couplet, set off both syntactically and semantically, suggests that the work is meant to be Shakespearean. However, the first two quatrains exhibit enclosed rhyme – abbacddc – rather than the alternating rhyme typical of the Shakespearean sonnet. Furthermore, lines 9–12 end with the following words: "desperate / silenced it / favourite / intimate". Following on the example of the first two

[10] For a brief survey of the sonnet's early history and forms, see Regan (2019: 5–11). See the appendix to this article for a listing of Larkin's sonnets and their rhyme schemes.

quatrains, the intended scheme is probably effe (more precisely, E′F′F′E′, given that all the rhymes are dactylic), but, in light of Larkin's penchant for approximate rhyme, the four lines could be said to rhyme eeee or efef. Such ambiguity, which can occur with modern rhyme practice when it is not always obvious what is meant to rhyme with what, has been analyzed by the Russian scholar Vadim Baevsky (1972) and termed "shadow rhyme", where alternate readings of a rhyme scheme are possible. In addition, this poem also contains lines (including one with as many as seventeen syllables) that fall outside the norm for iambic pentameter.

The also unpublished "Flesh to flesh was loving from the start..." (1942; Larkin 2012: 208) has a division of lines that would be typical for a Shakespearian sonnet – 4+4+4+2 – but the rhyme scheme is highly unusual, while the rhymes themselves are approximate. Below are the first two quatrains:

Flesh to flesh was loving from the start,	a
But only to itself, and could not calm	b
My skeleton of glass that sits and starves,	c
Nor my marsh hand that sets my music out:	d [a]
It is not kissing at the acid root	a
Where my bald spirit found a crying home,	b
Nor my starved blood that your excitement loves,	c
And wears all brilliant badged upon your coat:	d [a]

The first lines of all three quatrains rhyme, as do the second, third and fourth lines, so the scheme for the entire poem seems to be abcd abcd abcd ee. However, since the "a" and "d" rhymes are both based on the consonant "t" – and since "start" in line 1 forms an exact rhyme with "heart" in the fourth line of stanza 3, it is just as – if not more – likely that the rhyme scheme should be described as abca abca abca dd. Again, we have in instance of shadow rhyme. The scheme is sufficiently unique that there may be some hesitancy in classifying the poem as a sonnet, though the fourteen lines, the 4+4+4+2 division, and the iambic pentameter all suggest the sonnet form.

Sometimes it is difficult to ascertain whether Larkin was following either model, the more so because he tended to use an ababcdcd rhyme scheme over the first eight lines in either case. "Ultimatum" (Larkin 2012: 103), a poem that was written and published in 1940 (but not in any of Larkin's collections), is notable not only for the 7+3+4 grouping of the lines (as in "Schoolmaster"), but also for concluding with three rhyme couplets – eeffgg – which is unusual

for both main sonnet types. "The Conscript" (1940; Larkin 2012: 157 [not to be confused with the sonnet "Conscript", 1941; Larkin 2012: 7]) has the conventional 8+6 layout of the Petrarchan sonnet, but the same rhyme scheme as "Ultimatum", a similarity noted by Regan (2019: 330–331). A significant feature of "The Conscript" is the presence of enjambement after each of the poem's first five lines. Larkin in general employs enjambement quite frequently – at times even at the boundary between stanzas – and, as we shall see, long series of lines without syntactic breaks at the end can be found throughout his career. "There is no language of destruction for..." (1940; Larkin 2012: 185) has the three concluding couplets of the previous two poems, but the rhymes in the first eight lines are enclosed, rather than alternating, as shown below. Larkin further complicates matters by repeating the "a" rhyme in lines five and eight:

There is no language of destruction for	a
The use of the chaotic; silence the only	b
Path for those hysterical and lonely.	b
That upright beauty cannot banish fear,	a
Or wishing help the weak to gain the fair	a
Is reason for it: that the skilled event,	c
Gaining applause, cannot a death prevent,	c
Short-circuits impotent who travel far.	a

As in some other instances, Larkin bases the "a" rhyme on consonants (here, "f'" and "r"), while the vowels differ. Had he repeated the "b" rhyme as well, he would have had a classical Petrarchan octet.

Even when poems essentially follow the Petrarchan rhyme scheme for both the octet and the sestet, the grouping of lines may be irregular. In "Story" (1941; Larkin 2012: 104) he divides the lines into 8+5+1, with that lone final line providing an effective thematic closure ("But he forgot all this as he grew older."). "Rupert Brooke" (1940; Larkin 2012: 168), despite the division of lines into a conventional 8+6 grouping, defies expectations in a different way. Most of Larkin's rhymes are monosyllabic (masculine); those rhymes with two or three syllables generally appear occasionally and with no clear ordering. But in this poem, surely not by accident, he begins with two sets of dactylic rhymes followed by two sets of feminine: "poetry / happily", "influence / eloquence", "garden / taken", "Tahiti / quickly". The actual rhyme pattern is A′B ′B ′A ′CDDCeFgF′eg. In a somewhat later poem, "Neurotics" (1949; Larkin 2012: 266) Larkin links the two halves of the octet by employing interlocking rhyme:

No one gives you a thought, as day by day	a
You drag your feet, clay-thick with misery.	b
None think how stalemate in you grinds away,	a
Holding your spinning wheels an inch too high	c
To bite on earth. The mind, it's said, is free:	b
But not your minds. They, rusted stiff, admit	d
Only what will accuse or horrify,	c
Like slot machines only bent pennies fit.	d

The irregular pattern of the rhymes underscores the content. As we shall see, such linkage also appears, often in quite imaginative ways, in some of the works that employ other stanza forms.

"Neurotics" remained unpublished, as did all but three of the other sonnets that Larkin wrote from 1949 on. While the twelve sonnets of his mature period do not seem like many, his overall productivity had also decreased. In fact, among the unpublished writings the frequency of sonnets declines only slightly. His unpublished stanzaic poetry from 1946 on consisted of 71 poems (Table III). The nine unpublished sonnets over those years accounts for 12.7% of those works, as opposed to sonnets comprising 13.1% of the unpublished stanzaic poetry over his entire career (Table IVa). Rather, the reduction in his use of the form appears primarily within his published poetry. If six of the thirteen stanzaic poems he published in journals from 1938 to 1945 were sonnets as were five of the 25 stanzaic poems in *The North Ship*, they account for none of the eleven poems he published in journals after 1945 and for only three of the 77 stanzaic poems in the three mature collections.

The only post-1945 sonnet that displays a clear break with the usual rhyme schemes is "Neurotics", though Larkin does exhibit variety in his composition of the sestet: the twelve poems from this period contain eight different rhyme schemes in that portion of the poem. All but one of the seven sonnets that he wrote between 1949 and 1953 divide into clusters of 8+6. The sole exception, "Spring" (1950; Larkin 2012: 40), turns out to be the only sonnet from those years that he published. It divides 8+3+3 and has a rhyme scheme in the sestet (eff / geg) that does not appear in any of his 39 other sonnets. For the next eight years Larkin does not write sonnets at all. Gill (2019: 92) observes that the next three sonnets, all composed between December 1961 and January 1962, do not break new ground in terms of either form or content. True enough, but in each Larkin deviates at least in minor ways from his usual practice. Although "Hotter shorter days arrive, like happiness..." (1961; Larkin 2012: 301) contains unusual rhyming in the sestet (efgfge), which he used only one other time in his sonnets, it is more notable for its rhythm. Trochaic lines

appear at the beginning of both the octet and the sestet, while others start with choriambs. The result is a heavy emphasis on the opening syllable of the line throughout the poem as well as an unusual degree of departure from the iambic rhythm preferred in his sonnets. While "January" (1962; Larkin 2012: 302) has a rhyme scheme befitting a sonnet, Larkin places the typographical break after line 6, creating a 6+8 structure. The third of these, "And now the leaves suddenly lose strength..." (1961; Larkin 2012: 301), has its break occur not after but in the middle of line 8.[11]

The two final sonnets that Larkin published again show him tinkering with its conventional form. As with his earlier sonnets (cf. Gill 2019: 87), Larkin was more inclined to publish those sonnets that deviated from the standard presentation. "Friday Night in the Royal Station Hotel" (1966; Larkin 2012: 80–81) has a very typical sonnet rhyme scheme but with a space after line 9 instead of line 8.

Light spreads darkly downwards from the high	a
Clusters of lights over empty chairs	b
That face each other, coloured differently.	a
Through open doors, the dining-room declares	b
A larger loneliness of knives and glass	c
And silence laid like carpet. A porter reads	d
An unsold evening paper. Hours pass,	c
And all the salesmen have gone back to Leeds,	d
Leaving full ashtrays in the Conference Room.	e
In shoeless corridors, the lights burn. How	f
Isolated, like a fort, it is –	g
The headed paper, made for writing home	e
(If home existed) letters of exile: *Now*	f
Night comes on. Waves fold behind villages.	g

While a mood of emptiness and isolation persists throughout the poem, the break between sections is heightened by having the first part end with a line whose rhyme partner does not appear until after the gap. Regan (2019: 336)

[11] "And now the leaves suddenly lose strength..." was first published in Larkin 1989: 139, with several errors in transcribing the workbook draft, of which the most serious is the placement of two words from line 9 at the end of line 8, leaving the word at the end of line 6 without its rhyme partner and significantly altering the overall rhyme scheme of the poem. See Bullock's commentary in Larkin 2012: 630.

further suggests that this 9+5 layout "subtly intimates the poem's preoccupation with duration". Of note is the rhythm at the start of the poem, about which Larkin himself remarked: "'Facing' should be 'That face', I think, to get it into rhythm (syllable missing in both lines 1 and 2)" (Larkin 2012: 452). The change from "Facing" in the version that was originally published in a newspaper shows Larkin concerned with firmly establishing the iambic rhythm not too far into the poem. Line 1 is in fact trochaic, while line 2 begins with a choriamb and would need a monosyllabic word between "lights" and "over" to become a regular iambic pentameter (hence Larkin's remark that each of those lines is missing a syllable). However, he was willing to forgo metrical perfection in favor of the immediacy conveyed by the sharpness of the wording.

The other of these late works, "The Card-Players" (1970; Larkin 2012: 84), is the first sonnet since the earliest years of Larkin's poetic career to begin with enclosed rhyme (abbacddc), and the sestet similarly employs a scheme (efeggf) that he also had not used in many years. (He had, though, once used the same rhyme scheme for an entire sonnet: "Observation" [1941; Larkin 2012: 105]). The most unorthodox feature of "The Card-Players" is the separation of just the final line of the poem from the rest, so that the lines divide 13+1. Miyauchi (2002: 71) points out that the isolated last line – "Rain, wind and fire! The secret, bestial peace!" – functions something like the concluding couplet of a Shakespearean sonnet. Gill (2019: 92–93) further notes that the line's set of exclamations, rather than complete sentences, help isolate it from the rest in terms of syntax, style, and prosody. There is also a subtle difference in terms of rhyme. All the other rhymes in the poem are exact and separated by no more than two lines. However, "trees", the word rhyming with "peace", is separated from it by three lines, and the final consonants in these words are not identical but instead comprise a voiced/voiceless pair.[12] This unconventional and extreme isolation of the poem's final line serves as yet another example of Larkin's finding creative ways to refresh a well-established genre.

Many of the unusual features that appear in Larkin's sonnets – and in the other types of stanzas discussed below – are evident only upon reading a poem, not hearing it. Larkin, in fact, felt that the way to become acquainted with a poem was to read it. "Hearing a poem, as opposed to reading it on the page, you miss so much – the shape, the punctuation, the italics, even knowing how far you are from the end" (Larkin 1983: 61). He saw recitation as only of limited value: "I suppose that an actual reading of a poem by its author can

[12] Booth (2014: 361) remarks that the difference in sound between these words leaves the last line "effectively unrhymed".

be helpful: you can hear where he puts the stresses, whether he sounds ironic or flippant or serious. You go back to the text with a firmer grasp on what he meant". While sound is certainly important, "Any adult reader ought to be able to imagine [the sound of a poem] as he reads with the eye" (Larkin 2001: 37). The placement of typographical breaks, the discernment of unusual rhyme schemes, the recognition of a rhyme word placed far from its partner, the conflict between enjambement and line endings – all these are matters that would be difficult or impossible to perceive upon just hearing a poem, but Larkin was writing for readers.

III. Three-, Four-, Five- and Six-Line Stanzas

Most of the poems in three-line stanzas that Larkin wrote early in his career had a basic aaa rhyme pattern, but by the 1950s he was regularly finding other possibilities for stanzas of this length. Two exceptions among the earlier poems are "Midsummer Night, 1940" (Larkin 2012: 156–157) and "This triumph ended in the curtained head" (1942, Larkin 2012: 204). The former is a poem in ten 3-line stanzas that rhyme abc cba bde edb def fed ..., creating a complex chain of rhymes: in each pair of stanzas, the two middle lines rhyme, as do the first line of the first stanza with the last line of the second and the last line of the first with the first line of the second. In addition, the middle rhyme of one pair then appears at the beginning and end of the next pair. I"This triumph ended..." starts with two unrhymed lines before initiating a rhyme chain that links all the stanzas. xxa bab cbc dbd bx. In his later verse Larkin looks to *terza rima*, the one traditional form besides the sonnet in which he showed more than a passing interest. It provided the direct model for a couple of poems and seems to have inspired the structure of others. "Whatever Happened" (1953; Larkin 2012: 34), from *The Less Deceived*, is a *terza rima* sonnet, combining features of both traditional forms. This type of poem employs the interlocking rhymes of *terza rima*, but instead of an indeterminate length it consists of precisely four tercets followed by a concluding couplet (rather than the single final line of the traditional *terza rima*). The rhyme scheme for the poem, written in the iambic pentameter traditional for this form, is aba / bcb / cdc / ded / ee.[13] His unpublished poetry from the 1950s includes "Behind Time" (1956;

[13] On the *terza rima* sonnet see Turco 2012:364. While such works straddle both forms, the interlocking rhyme suggests classifying them with other *terza rima* poems rather than with sonnets. Regan (2019: 334–335), though, discusses the poem along with Larkin's other sonnets.

Larkin 2012: 295), a 10-line parody in *terza rima*, and the unfinished "A Sense of Shape" (1955; Larkin 2012: 290), which rhymes aba / cbc / dbd..., with the same "b" rhyme extending throughout the five completed stanzas and suggesting the influence of the villanelle (which, however, would also maintain the same "a" rhyme throughout). Two poems in *The Whitsun Weddings* would appear to have been influenced by the interlocking stanzas of *terza rima*. The twelve lines of "Talking in Bed" (1960; Larkin 2012: 61), which rhyme axa / bab / cbc / ddd, bear more than a passing resemblance to the *terza rima* pattern, which would be aba / bcb / cdc / ded. Larkin possibly came up with the rhyme pattern by applying the typical *terza rima* formula backwards over the first three stanzas: the middle line of stanza 3 provides the rhyme for the first and last line in stanza 2, and the middle line stanza 2 does the same for stanza 1. As Miyauchi (2002: 63–65) has pointed out, the odd, "unstable" structure of the stanzas in a way reflects the thorny relationship of the lovers in the poem. "For Sidney Bechet" (1954; Larkin 2012: 54), dedicated to a jazz musician much admired by Larkin, seemingly resembles *terza rima* for its first five lines, but turns out to go in a different direction. Below is the poem in its entirety:

That note you hold, narrowing and rising, shakes	a
Like New Orleans reflected on the water,	b
And in all ears appropriate falsehood wakes,	a
Building for some a legendary Quarter	b
Of balconies, flower-baskets and quadrilles,	c
Everyone making love and going shares –	d
Oh, play that thing! Mute glorious Storyvilles	c
Others may license, grouping around their chairs	d
Sporting-house girls like circus tigers (priced	e
Far above rubies) to pretend their fads,	f
While scholars manqués nod around unnoticed	e
Wrapped up in personnels like old plaids.	f
On me your voice falls as they say love should,	g
Like an enormous yes. My Crescent City	h
Is where your speech alone is understood,	g
And greeted as the natural noise of good,	g
Scattering long-haired grief and scored pity.	h

The logic behind the rhyme scheme may not at first be obvious, but it is based on a principle that Larkin was to employ to startling effect with longer stanzas as well: applying a rhyme scheme that does not coincide with the length of the stanza. The rhyme scheme repeats every four lines, not three, over the first twelve lines: aba b/cd cd/e fef, where "/" delineates the borders of the rhyme units. The usage of a five-line unit (ghggh) at the end was possibly meant to serve as a sign of closure.[14]

Not all the later poems in three-line stanzas show the influence of *terza rima*. "If, My Darling" (1951; Larkin 2012: 43–44) consists of eight stanzas where the pattern is axa, with the middle line unrhymed, and the rhymes are often approximate in various ways: "decide / head" with the consonants carrying the rhyme; "betrayal / all", where the final syllable in the first word of the rhyme pair is not stressed; and both types of approximation in "light / coagulate". Sometimes Larkin eschews rhyme entirely, as in "The Explosion" (1970; Larkin 2012: 95), the final poem in *High Windows*, where he has a single line at the end, as though in imitation of *terza rima*.[15] More often, though, in his mature poetry he tests various possibilities of rhyme. Another poem in *High Windows*, "Sad Steps" (1968; Larkin 2012: 89), extends its rhyming over each pair of the poem's six stanzas: aba / bba. The stanzas may have three lines, but the rhyme sequence contains six. In all, then, Larkin was able to find a rich variety even within the confines of this very brief stanza form.

As already noted, four-line stanzas account for a little less than one-third of the stanzaic poems that Larkin never published or collected (Table IVa) but are much less prevalent in his four published volumes, reflecting what appears to have been a tendency toward greater variety and originality among those works that he regarded as his most successful. His poems written in four-line stanzas, whether published or not, reveal only occasional attempts at going beyond familiar stanza structures. As with most poets, he prefers alternating rhyme in his four-line stanzas (abab) but also occasionally uses both abba and aabb. A few of these works are unrhymed, and others rhyme only the even lines. Some of his more interesting effects with these stanzas involve his use of meters, rather than rhyme. While he regarded the iambic pentameter as

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[14] Larkin labored over this final portion. The workbooks suggest the poem initially lacked the final two lines and that he spent some time working on the fifth stanza – the ghg sequence – as well as on additional lines (Larkin 2012: 404; cf. Tolley 1997: 174, who surmises that the poem was only finally completed in typescript).

[15] Larkin partly compensates for the lack of rhyme by his effective use of meter. The sudden appearance of iambic tetrameter at line 13 of a heretofore trochaic tetrameter poem signals the instant of the explosion. Brownjohn (1975: 25–26) has remarked on the effectiveness of this rhythmical change in foregrounding that event.

canonical for the sonnet and often turned to that meter in his stanzas with eight or more lines, his four-line stanzas are composed in a wide range of meters and generally in shorter lines than the pentameter. For instance, "Within a voice said: Cry!..." (1939; Larkin 2012: 140–141), which rhymes abba, is in iambic trimeter throughout, while "Modesties" (1949; Larkin 2012: 111) alternates trochaic tetrameter and dimeter lines within an abab rhyme scheme. Larkin's use of meter, however, is often quite free, and a thorough study of it would require a separate article. Among other things, he at times varies line lengths without a discernible pattern but at others operates according to a definite design. In "Cut Grass" (1971; Larkin 2012: 94), the penultimate poem in *High Windows*, he has the meter metamorphose from iambic dimeter to iambic trimeter. All four lines of stanza 1 are in dimeter, stanza 2 has dimeter in lines 2 and 3 surrounded by trimeter in 1 and 4, while the third stanza has dimeter only in line 1 and then trimeter in the poem's final three lines.

As for uncommon rhyme schemes, his post-1945 poetry includes a striking example in "Wires" (1950; Larkin 2012: 35):

The widest prairies have electric fences,	a
For though old cattle know they must not stray	b
Young steers are always scenting purer water	c
Not here but anywhere. Beyond the wires	d
Leads them to blunder up against the wires	d
Whose muscle-shredding violence gives no quarter.	c
Young steers become old cattle from that day,	b
Electric limits to their widest senses.	a

Brownjohn (1975: 24) is one of many who have pointed out that the opening stanza, when first seen, does not appear to contain any rhyme at all; only upon reading the second stanza does the rhyme partner for each end word appear in reverse order. Interestingly, and reflective of Larkin's early interest in creating unusual rhyme schemes, he had used precisely the same technique, albeit more elaborately, in "The Dead City: A Vision" (1941; Larkin 2012: 193). Each pair of that poem's six stanzas rhymes abcd / dcba, with the same, sometimes approximate, rhymes used in all six stanzas (so that the poem's "d" rhymes, for instance, are "dark / talk", "stalk / work", "park / lurk").[16]

[16] I have not found an instance of Hardy's reversing the order of the rhymes in the way that Larkin does, but Hardy's device of having each line in a stanza rhyme with a line in another might have been an inspiration for Larkin. In "A New Year's Eve in War Time" Hardy maintains

Another experiment with linked stanzas (sometimes also called interlocking stanzas or rhyme chains) from that early period appears in "The wind at creep of dawn..." (1941; Larkin 2012: 194):

The wind at creep of dawn	a
Through arches and spires	b
Swells, and on the lawn	a
Manoeuvres, alone;	a
Who kept planes likes desires	b
Back in alien shires	b
Last night, this daybreak pass	c
Where misery has signed	d
Every unhappy face,	c
And, wind, in meetingplace	c
Of wish and fear, be kind	d
In dreams to each unconsummated mind.	d

The poem is in iambic trimeter, with an expanded final line perhaps meant as a device of closure. Each rhyme appears three times in the poem, arranged in a sequence that is more regular than it might seem. The first "a" and "b" lines are followed by two "a" lines and then two "b" lines; similarly, the initial "c" and "d" lines precede two "c" and then two "d" lines. Thus, we have a six-line rhyme scheme (abaabb) appearing in a poem with four-line stanzas. As in "For Sidney Bechet", the rhyme scheme and stanza length do not match. Apparently close in time to "Wires" is "The Spirit Wooed" (1950 [?]; Larkin 2012: 273–274), which features a particularly odd stanza structure: the first line in each of its five stanzas is unrhymed, the next two lines rhyme, and then the last line of stanza 1 rhymes with the last lines of stanzas 3 and 5, while the last line of stanza 2 rhymes with that of stanza 4: xaab xccd xeeb xffd xggb.

the same rhyme sets over all seven stanzas, with six-line stanzas at the beginning and end surrounding five-line stanzas. The rhyme scheme for the entire poem is abcdee / abcde / abcde / abcde / abcde / abcde / abcdee. The first three stanzas are as follow: Phantasmal fears, / And the flap of the flame, / And the throb of the clock, / And a loosened slate, / And the blind night's drone, / Which tiredly the spectral pines intone!! // And the blood in my ears / Strumming always the same, / And the gabble-cock / With its fitful grate, / And myself, alone. // The twelfth hour nears / Hand-hid as in shame; / I undo the lock, / And listen, and wait / For the Young Unknown (Hardy 2001: 548).

Except for "Wires" and "The Spirit Wooed," his later four-line stanzas exhibit less virtuosic contrivances, though "High Windows" (1967; Larkin 2012: 80) displays a subtle but meticulously worked out design. The first stanza contains rhyme only in the even lines, with the odd lines, which end in "kids" and "diaphragm", clearly unrhymed. Stanza 2 has the odd lines rhyming very approximately ("lives / harvester"), so that many would perceive them as unrhymed, particularly after seeing the pattern established in the first stanza. In stanza 3 the rhyme in the odd lines becomes more evident ("if / life") and by stanza 4 it is exact ("hide / slide") – completing an uncommon evolution over the course of a poem from partially rhymed to fully rhymed stanzas.

Although five-line stanzas are less common in Larkin's oeuvre than those of several other lengths, he nonetheless turns to them regularly over the course of his career, reaching a peak in the volume *The Less Deceived*, where six of the 21 stanzaic poems employ that form. His early attempts with these stanzas tend to be straightforward, though at times marked by a fixed ordering of different meters in each stanza, as in this excerpt from "When the night puts twenty veils..." (1939; Larkin 2012: 177–178):

This summertime must be forgot	a
– It will be, if we would or not –	a
Who lost or won?	b
Oblivious run:	b
And sunlight, if it could, would coldly rot.	a

In all three stanzas of the poem, Larkin uses iambic tetrameter in the first two lines, iambic dimeter in the next two, and iambic pentameter in the fifth. The rhyme scheme is perhaps atypical for Larkin in that it begins with a rhyme pair, whereas an opening "ab" scheme appears in most of his five-line stanzas. A less strictly regulated use of different meters can be observed in "Past days of gales..." (1945; Larkin 2012: 250), where the lines grow longer from beginning to end. The first stanza is basically in iambic dimeter; the second, after beginning with a dimeter line, has lines ranging from three to five feet; and the final stanza has three lines in pentameter along with one each in trimeter and tetrameter. Among his later poems, "The View" (1972; Larkin 2012: 321), written in the year of Larkin's fiftieth birthday, is notable for its observance of the clausula, as seen in its last stanza:

Where has it gone, the lifetime?	A
Search me. What's left is drear.	b
Unchilded and unwifed, I'm	A

Able to view that clear: b
So final. And so near. b

Throughout the poem the first and third lines end in feminine rhyme, while the others are both indented and masculine. The exact rhymes and the indentation not only make the rhyme scheme more obvious than in many of Larkin's poems but contribute to the light tone of this iambic trimeter poem, even as this stanza assumes a serious tone. Note the remarkable compound rhyme "lifetime / unwifed, I'm", which stands out both for the involvement of two words in the second part of the rhyme pair as well as for the use of the extremely rare word "unwifed".

The Less Deceived not only contains Larkin's greatest concentration of five-line stanzas but also some of his more original examples of this form. For instance, in "Wants" (1950; Larkin 2012: 32) the first and last lines of each stanza are identical and the middle three are unrhymed, while "Triple Time" (1953; Larkin 2012: 40) leaves the second line of each stanza unrhymed, so that the pattern is axbab. Larkin also draws attention to the fourth line in each stanza by making it shorter than the rest. In "Arrivals, Departures" (1953; Larkin 2012: 45) he links the stanzas by creating a rhyme pattern – four lines of enclosed rhyme – that is shorter than the stanza length. After repeating that pattern over the first 12 lines he then wraps up with a closing triple rhyme. Marking the end of each occurrence of the pattern with "/" reveals the following overall rhyme scheme: abba/c ddc/ef fe/ggg.[17] He does something even more elaborate in "I Remember, I Remember" (1954; Larkin 2012: 41–42), which, like a few of his other poems, takes as its starting point an actual moment during a train ride. A nine-line rhyme scheme overlaps the five-line stanzas, making the organizational principle less than obvious, at least initially, as the opening portion of the poem demonstrates:[18]

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[17] The triple rhyme serves as an element of closure and also comprises the three lines where the poem shifts at the end to a darker and broader vision: "And we are nudged from comfort, never knowing / How safely we may disregard their blowing, / Or if, this night, happiness too is going". Foley (2015: 26) mentions this poem specifically in his article that elucidates how many of Larkin's poems conclude with an abrupt alteration of the poem's meaning that is signaled by a shift in tone. As this poem and several of the others discussed in this article demonstrate, that change is often indicated as well by an alteration in the poem's stanza structure.

[18] In a letter, perhaps suggesting that he was not expecting most of his readers to focus unduly on the complexity of what he had created, Larkin (2012: 383) remarked "The rhyme scheme is just a piece of cleverness, but like all good rhyme schemes is not meant to be intrusive". In an earlier interview, though, Larkin stated he was pleased that Auden both noticed and liked the rhyme scheme (Larkin 2001: 31).

Coming up England by a different line	a
For once, early in the cold new year,	b
We stopped, and, watching men with number plates	c
Sprint down the platform to familiar gates,	c
"Why, Coventry!" I exclaimed. "I was born here".	b
I leant far out, and squinnied for a sign	a
That this was still the town that had been "mine"	a
So long, but found I wasn't even clear	b
Which side was which. From where those cycle-crates	c
Were standing, had we annually departed	d
For all those family hols? ... A whistle went:	e
Things moved. I sat back, staring at my boots.	f
"Was that", my friend smiled, "where you 'have your roots'?"	f
No, only where my childhood was unspent,	e
I wanted to retort, just where I started:	d

The first three lines of the following stanza rhyme def, completing the second sequence of the pattern. Every sequence is repeated twice (abc cba abc), reversing the order twice in mirror-like fashion (Miyauchi 2002: 63). In all, there are four sequences over seven stanzas plus a final isolated line to complete the fourth nine-line sequence, with the visual separation of that one line ("Nothing, like something, happens anywhere") giving it special import. The exact rhymes make it easy for readers to perceive that the work is fully rhymed, but the odd intervals between the rhymes creates a disjointed sound rhythm. The first rhyme word in each sequence seems forgotten for four lines before it reemerges in a couplet; the third rhyme initially appears as a couplet and then goes away for four lines before it echoes once again, while the middle rhyme reappears at steady two-line intervals. Whether these shifting intervals between rhymes were part of Larkin's intent or whether they simply emerged from the pattern he devised is impossible to know. In either case, for its structure as well as for the content, this is one of Larkin's most noteworthy five-line poems.

The more common forms of the six-line stanza in English poetry include that with a concluding couplet (ababcc) and that in which an opening couplet is followed by an enclosed rhyme (aabccb). During the twentieth century a stanza in abcabc also gained currency among certain poets (Häublein 1978: 25–27). All these forms, along with variants such as abbacc, appear among Larkin's numerous poems in six-line stanzas, but he appears to have been

particularly attracted to beginning his stanzas with an abc sequence and then exhibiting a different order over the last three lines. One example appears in his longest completed poem, "After-Dinner Remarks" (1940; Larkin 2012: 179–183), which he chose not to publish.[19] Its 22 stanzas rhyme abcacb; the lines containing the "a" and "c" rhymes are in iambic tetrameter and those with the "b" rhyme are in iambic trimeter. Another early instance of his explorations with six-line stanzas appears in "Disintegration" (1942; Larkin 2012: 106), where the middle of three stanzas is as follows:

Time that scatters hair upon a head	a
Spreads the ice sheet on the shaven lawn;	b
Signing an annual permit for the frost	c
Ploughs the stubble in the land at last	c
To introduce the unknown to the known	b
And only by politeness make them breed;	a

The stanza illustrates Larkin's free-wheeling use of meter. While the first and last stanzas of the poem are undoubtedly in iambic pentameter, here – possibly to emphasize the image at the heart of this stanza – he shifts to a patently trochaic rhythm in lines 1, 2 and 4, before switching back to iambic over the final two lines. The "a" rhymes in these stanzas serve as an example of Larkin's penchant for widely separating elements in his rhyme pairs. As well, the inversion of a rhyme scheme is a technique to which he turned with some frequency: he used it to pair the four-line stanzas of "Wires" and "The Dead City: A Vision"; the efggfe pattern appears in the sestet of two sonnets, "To My Wife" (1951; Larkin 2012: 274) and "January"; and it lies at the basis of the rhyme pattern in "I Remember, I Remember".

His last two collections both have five poems in six-line stanzas, and all demonstrate his attention to formal detail. In *The Whitsun Weddings*, "Nothing To Be Said" (1961; Larkin 2012: 50–51), which is unrhymed, is basically written in iambic trimeter, with several iambic dimeter lines at key moments in the poem. The four poems that are rhymed all employ different (and unusual) schemes. "Broadcast" (1961; Larkin 2012: 52–53) serves as another instance in which Larkin carefully observes the clausula. The rhyme scheme is basically aBaccB (though dactylic rhyme in the second stanza results in aB′accB′). In "A Study of Reading Habits" (1960; Larkin 2012: 62), the stanzas rhyme abcbac,

[19] "The Dance" (1963–1964; Larkin 2012: 306–309), with twelve completed eleven-line stanzas along with several additional lines would have been even longer, but it remained incomplete. See below for a discussion of that poem.

in "Ambulances" (1961; Larkin 2012: 63–64) they rhyme abcbca, and in "An Arundel Tomb" (1956; Larkin 2012: 71–72) the pattern is abbcac. Among the poems employing six-line stanzas in *High Windows*, two are atypical in different ways. "Vers de Société" (1971; Larkin 2012: 91) employs five different rhyme schemes over its six stanzas. The first and last stanzas are simply in rhymed couplets (aabbcc), and these enclose stanzas in abbcca, abccba, abbcac, and abaccb. Booth (2014: 366) points out that just as the rhyming – which in Booth's schema contains eight lines rather than six –of the last stanza returns to that of the first, so too does the subject matter, for in the final stanza the narrator accepts the invitation with which the poem begins. "Homage to a Government" (1969; Larkin 2012: 87) is a departure for Larkin in being a political poem. It is also a departure in that he uses the same word in both members of the rhyme pairs:

Next year we are to bring the soldiers home	a
For lack of money, and it is all right.	b
Places they guarded, or kept orderly,	c
Must guard themselves, and keep themselves orderly.	c
We want the money for ourselves at home	a
Instead of working. And this is all right.	b

The second of the three stanzas in this poem offers slight variations to the repetition, in that the middle rhyme is "here / hear" and the rhyme word "minds" is used once as a verb and once as a noun. The entire poem is also conspicuous for the purposeful use of other repetitions: for instance, the phrase "is all right", used twice in this stanza, reappears in stanza 2 and "for lack of money" shows up again in stanza 3, while the last line of stanza 2 and the first line of stanza 3 both begin "Next year we shall be". The repetitions both of rhyme words and of individual phrases underline the mocking commentary on the government's ineffectuality.

Finally, "Love Again" (1979; Larkin 2012: 320), which was completed five years after *High Windows* appeared and remained unpublished in Larkin's lifetime, reveals him using six-line stanzas in yet another way: by connecting them in a quite unorthodox fashion. For the entire poem the rhyme scheme is ababca / dedecd /afafca. While it may not be immediately obvious, all three stanzas have essentially the same pattern. The "c" rhyme ("afterwards / words / rewards") links the three stanzas with its appearance in the fifth line, and each stanza has one rhyme set for lines 1, 3 and 6 and another for lines 2 and 4. In addition the "a" rhyme of stanza 1 reappears in stanza 3. "Love Again" serves as evidence that even when Larkin's poetic output had slowed drastically during the late 1970s, he did not cease to be inventive in the stanza structure of his verse.

IV. Seven- and Eight-Line Stanzas

If Larkin did not write many seven-line stanzas, he nonetheless made interesting use of this relatively rare stanza length. Four of his twelve poems employing that form were written early in his career, in 1940 and 1941, and two of these, each with seven stanzas, are among his longer poems from that period: "Out in the lane I pause: the night..." (1940; Larkin 2012: 185–186) and "The house on the edge of the serious wood..." (1941; Larkin 2012: 191–192). Both have a regular pattern of longer and shorter lines. In "The house..." the rhyme scheme is primarily abbccaa, with the "b" rhyme pair coinciding with the shorter lines. However, if the rhyming of the "aa" couplet at the end of each stanza tends to be exact, the first "a" line is sometimes only very approximately rhymed with the others – if at all. In one instance the rhyme scheme is clearly xaabbcc, and a couple of other stanzas could also be described that way. The shorter lines also rhyme in "Out in the lane...", but describing the rhymes presents a similar conundrum:

From the steep road that travels down	a
Towards the shops, I hear the feet	b
Of lonely walkers in the night	b
Or lingering pairs;	c
Girls and their soldiers from the town	a
Who in the shape of future years	[c]
Have equal shares;	c

The iambic dimeter lines end with an exact "c" rhyme in all the stanzas. The "a" rhymes are also exact, while the "b" rhymes are approximate. The middle "c" word only rhymes approximately with the two others, but "years" is at least as close in sound to "pairs / shares" as "feet" is to "night", so for this stanza the abbcacc description seems justified. Four of the remaining stanzas in the poem are also constructed in just this way, with line 6 seeming to contain an approximate rhyme with the two other "c" endings, which rhyme exactly. But in the fifth and sixth stanzas that is not the case: the sixth stanza, for instance, has lines 4 and 7 ending with "tree / me", while the last word in line 6 is "joy", so that the scheme turns out to be abbcaxc, with the one unrhymed line.

Of the last eight poems that Larkin wrote using this form, no fewer than five employ linked stanzas. The two stanzas of "If hands could free you, heart..." (1943–1944 [?]; Larkin 2012: 17) contain one of his early attempts at such a linkage:

If hands could free you, heart,	a
Where would you fly?	b
Far, beyond every part	a
Of earth this running sky	b
Makes desolate? Would you cross	c
City and hill and sea,	d
If hands could set you free?	d
I would not lift the latch;	e
For I could run	f
Through fields, pit-valleys, catch	e
All beauty under the sun –	f
Still end in loss:	c
I should find no bent arm, no bed	g
To rest my head.	g

Usually, the rhymes connecting stanzas are found near their borders. By burying the "c" rhyme in the fifth line of each – the same technique he later used in the six-line stanzas of "Love Again" – Larkin impedes perception of the linkage.[20] The technique is analogous to his occasional lengthy separation between the words comprising rhyme pairs in some of his longer stanzas – he makes the reader work to discover the rhyme. "Harvest of flowers, the head..." (1943–1944 [?]; Larkin 2012: 19), the other seven-line stanza in *The North Ship*, has the rhyme connecting the two stanzas appear at the very end: aabbccd / eeffggd. The four-stanza "Hospital Visits" (1953; Larkin 2012: 285–286), which Larkin did not publish, does something similar. The scheme for the first stanza is abacbcd, with the "d" rhyme recurring at the end of each stanza ("day / naturally / decay / away"). A different way of linking stanzas appears in "First Sight" (1956; Larkin 2012: 65), the one poem from *The Whitsun Weddings* written in seven-line stanzas. Its two trochaic tetrameter stanzas rhyme ababacc / dededaa. The pattern of rhymes in the stanzas is identical, but instead of connecting the ends as in the previous poems cited, Larkin links the poem's first rhyme with the last, a feature made all the more prominent by his using the same word to conclude the first and last lines of the poem.

[20] Larkin may well have come up with this format on his own, but Hardy has at least one poem, "Before Marching and After" (Hardy 2001: 544–545), with the same rhyme scheme as "If hands could free you, heart..." and the "c" rhyme in line 5 serving to link all three stanzas in his poem.

For all that this article contains descriptions of some highly unusual and at times convoluted rhyme schemes, that in "The Building" (1972; Larkin 2012: 84–86) may well be the most intricate of all. The poem contains nine seven-line stanzas and a not-quite orphan line at the end, for a total of 64 lines. As Timms (1973: 130) has pointed out, the poem's eight-line rhyme scheme does not coincide with the number of lines in the stanzas – as in some other poems we have seen. Furthermore, that rhyme scheme itself is quite complex (abcbdcad), further hindering easy perception of the poem's structure. Thus stanza 2 begins with the "d" rhyme needed to complete the first occurrence of the rhyme scheme, stanza 3 begins with the "ad" needed to complete its second occurrence, and so forth. As usual and as particularly necessary in this case, Larkin worked out his rhyme scheme early in the process of composition (Tolley 1997: 131). In addition, he appears to have intended from the start to write a rather long poem: since the first number divisible by both seven and eight is 56, he would have needed to write precisely eight stanzas to have a complete repetition of the rhyme scheme conclude with the final stanza. Since he chose to write a ninth stanza, he followed the last stanza with one more line, which both allowed him to round off the final occurrence of the rhyme scheme and happened to provide "The Building" with a powerful conclusion. The last portion of the poem is given below, starting within stanza 7 to provide the beginning of a sentence and with subscripts to indicate the number of the rhyme scheme:

[...] In it, conceits	a_6
And self-protecting ignorance congeal	d_6
To carry life, collapsing only when	a_7
Called to these corridors (for now once more	b_7
The nurse beckons –). Each gets up and goes	c_7
At last. Some will be out by lunch, or four;	b_7
Others, not knowing it, have come to join	d_7
The unseen congregations whose white rows	c_7
Lie set apart above – women, men;	a_7
Old, young; crude facets of the only coin	d_7
This place accepts. All know they are going to die.	a_8
Not yet, perhaps not here, but in the end,	b_8
And somewhere like this. That is what it means,	c_8
This clean-sliced cliff; a struggle to transcend	b_8
The thought of dying, for unless its powers	d_8

Outbuild cathedrals nothing contravenes c_8
The coming dark, though crowds each evening try a_8

With wasteful, weak, propitiatory flowers. d_8

As can be seen, the last line of stanza seven and all of stanza eight combine for the seventh appearance of the rhyme scheme. The final use of the entire scheme then requires that extra line.

Certain aspects of Larkin's technique in this poem are recognizable from many of his mature works with even longer stanzas: the iambic pentameter (albeit here without any of the short lines that are sometimes a feature of those long stanzas), the exact rhyme, and the abundance of enjambement both within and between stanzas (only the first stanza concludes with a period). The disjunction of rhyme scheme and stanza length, in contrast, occurs elsewhere only rarely and for the most part in stanzas of shorter length. The sheer complexity – and difficulty of fully perceiving – the rhyme scheme results in a sense of imbalance that not only makes "The Building" disruptive in a formal sense but also serves to enhance the quality of unease arising from its concern with frailty and looming death. These themes suggest a connection to the two-decade earlier "Hospital Visits", another poem in linked seven-line stanzas.

Larkin's poems in eight-line stanzas reveal a growing confidence and variety in his utilization of that form. The sheer quantity of these poems and the variety of ways in which eight-line stanzas are constructed require some discussion. Between 1938 and 1945, he created some 20 works in these stanzas, of which six appeared in *The North Ship* while the others were not published in his lifetime. Seven of the works that pre-date 1946 utilize the simplest form of eight-line stanza, ababcdcd, which is often favored by poets in general. Three employ a minor alteration of that form (ababcddc), a further four are unrhymed, and one consists of paired rhymes (aabbccdd). The very early "Coventria" (1938) – which consistently rhymes only the even lines and has occasional rhymes elsewhere – may seem less typical, but it turns out to follow exactly the rhyme scheme of the school song that it parodies (Larkin 2012: 125, 510).

Yet a few signs of experimentation appear among his youthful compositions. "Address to Life, by a Young Man Seeking a Career" (Larkin 2012: 231–234) contains eleven eight-line stanzas from 1940 along with a ninth: "Postscript 1943". The first four stanzas rhyme ababcdcd, with the alternating rhymes matched to alternating tetrameter and trimeter lines – mostly anapests or amphibrachs, but with a few scattered dactylic lines as well. Beginning with the fifth stanza, however, Larkin only rhymes the even lines consistently, while

the ends of the odd lines only very occasionally contain approximate rhyme. Instead, internal rhyme appears in all the odd lines from that point on, enhancing the poem's already jaunty tone. Here is the poem's eighth stanza, with the internal rhymes marked in bold:

Therefore I am **not** a don or a **swot**
Or a dandy who grinds down the poor;
I'm not such a **blighter** to think I'm a **writer**
When others so obviously are.
Do you think, **perhaps**, I am one of the **chaps**
Who is either a Bull or a Bear?
Although it is **funny**, when it comes to **money**
I'm really no earthly good there.

The switch from end rhymes to internal rhymes in the odd lines does not appear to be motivated by the poem's content but serves mainly as an exercise in technique, with part of that technique involving preparation for the change. Stanza 3 already contains a hint of internal rhyme in lines 3 ("Do you want **me** to study **philosophy**") and 5 ("Do you want **me** to be the **authority**"). The fourth stanza further prepares for the transition: while the ends of all the lines continue to rhyme in that stanza, there is also clear internal rhyme in lines 1 and 5, and a less obvious example in line 7 ("And if you **chose** this, the facts **interpose**"), where the placement of "chose" somewhat blurs the effect. Once the internal rhymes take hold, the poem suggests the rapid, comic rhyming that occurs at times in Gilbert and Sullivan's comic operas or in the American musical theater. Larkin's feat here is diverting but not one that was to have an impact on his later writing.

"The earliest machine was simple..." (1940; Larkin 2012: 169) offers more direct evidence of early attempts at the techniques Larkin would use regularly as a mature poet. The first of the poem's four stanzas is as follows:

The earliest machine was simple:	a
Could clock the blue revolving days,	b
Their single rain and sun	c
That fell uncensored to their grass;	d
Easy then with facile grace	d
An unintentional symbol	a
That quickly and unnoticed dies,	b
Its power done,	c

The metrical ordering of each stanza is the same: iambic tetrameter in lines 1–2, 4–5 and 7, trimeter in lines 3 and 6, and dimeter in line 8. Larkin concocts an unusual rhyme scheme for these eight-line stanzas, with the abc pattern at the beginning and end, interrupted by a rhyme couplet in the middle. Besides its unusualness, the rhyme scheme is striking for the wide divisions between all but the "d" rhyme pair. The first three rhyme pairs are all separated by four lines belonging to three different rhyme sets. His rhyming throughout the poem is sometimes exact and sometimes depends on the identity of consonants rather than vowels ("days / dies"). The "c" rhymes, though, are exact in each stanza, perhaps to help bring out the point being made in the last line, which is further emphasized by its brevity.

Larkin's most intensive work with eight-line stanzas during his mature period occurred from 1961 through 1963, with nine poems employing that stanza length. Eight of these appeared in *The Whitsun Weddings*, while the ninth, "Breadfruit" (1961; Larkin 2012: 111–112), was published in a journal. Larkin regretted publishing the sixteen–line "Breadfruit" at all (2012: 489), and it is admittedly not a very good poem. However, it does reveal a great deal of attention to the structure of the stanzas. Lines 1, 3–6 and 8 are in iambic pentameter, while lines 2 and 7 are in iambic dimeter. Atypically for his stanzas of this length, Larkin links the poem's two stanzas by repeating two of the rhymes, so that the rhyme scheme becomes abacdcdb / ebefafab, with the "b" rhyme occupying the iambic dimeter lines in both stanzas.

The eight-line stanza poems within *The Whitsun Weddings* are extremely varied, signaling that he did not turn to that length simply for the sake of applying a readily available form. Notably, only one of these poems employs the common ababcdcd stanza throughout, though it also appears in the first stanza of "Dockery and Son" (1963; Larkin 2012: 65–67), where the rhyme schemes then vary. At first the changes from one stanza to the next in "Dockery and Son" are slight: ababcddc in stanza 2, followed by abbacdcd in stanza 3. Over the last three stanzas, though, Larkin shifts to more unusual rhyme schemes: abcadcbd in the fourth stanza and then abbcaddc in the last two stanzas. Larkin (2001: 90) stated that he had "a particular affection" for "Dockery and Son", which is one of his finest poems – Motion (1993: 334) calls it a "compressed autobiography" –and so it is worth looking a little more closely at the role of its stanzas. The sheer variety of stanza forms is no accident: early in his work on the poem Larkin wrote down the rhyme schemes for all the stanzas, and his original intention was to make them all different (Tolley 1997: 103). In a relatively early version, the first four lines of the fifth stanza, rhyme abac (to / see / two / begin), signifying that at one stage of Larkin's work he was on his way to having its rhyme scheme differ from that in stanza 6, even though

in the end the scheme turned out to be the same (Tolley 1997: 105). The poem starts with the most regular scheme, where the subject is simply the narrator's visit to his old college and the mention of Dockery by the dean. The next two stanzas, only slightly less typical in form, stay with memories of that time, but shift to his efforts to recall Dockery as he rides the train back from his visit. In the fourth stanza the poem pivots to the broader topics at its core – the unnoticed passage of time, the unknowable reasons for the path a life takes, the past choices that come to determine the irrevocable present – and the rhyme scheme becomes more complex, as if mirroring the narrator's struggle with more vexatious concerns. Notably, none of the stanzas are closed: it is as though the entire poem is one long connected burst: the mention of Dockery's son inspires the narrator's thoughts about Dockery that then lead directly into his broader ruminations. Not only does enjambement occur between stanzas, but it is found between more than half the poem's lines, to the point that the very absence of enjambement becomes a device for closure. Here is the poem's final stanza:

And how we got it; looked back on, they rear	a
Like sand-clouds, thick and close, embodying	b
For Dockery a son, for me nothing,	b
Nothing with all a son's harsh patronage.	c
Life is first boredom, then fear.	a
Whether or not we use it, it goes,	d
And leaves what something hidden from us chose,	d
And age, and then the only end of age.	c

Only the first two lines – fewer than in any other of the poem's stanzas – display enjambement. Over the final six lines there are seven commas and three periods, a denser accumulation of punctuation than at any other point in the work. The pace slows in lines 3 and 4 of the stanza, thanks to the syntactic parallelism in line 3, the repetition of "nothing" in lines 3 and 4, and the period at the end of line 4. Then the metrical irregularity of the stanza's fifth line – more of a dactylic trimeter than the iambic pentameter that is otherwise the poem's norm – serves as a marker of the significance that Larkin attaches to this line and those that follow.[21]

[21] Larkin himself has stated that he purposefully changed the meter at this point to draw his readers' attention to the final four lines: "I'm very proud of those lines. They're true. I remember when I was writing it, I thought this is how it's got to end. There's a break in the metre; it's meant as a jolt" (Larkin 2001: 50).

For the most part Larkin, like most poets writing in English, strongly favors masculine (monosyllabic) rhyme: the rhymes in the first stanza of "Dockery and Son" are "you / do, now / how, tight / night, and give / live". In the last stanza of that poem, quoted above, there are a couple of irregularities, both of which occur elsewhere in his oeuvre – and in English verse in general – but seem in keeping with his effort to distinguish this stanza from the rest of the poem. In lines 4 and 8 the iambic pentameter meter places the final ictus (strong position) on the last syllable, which works for "age" in line 8, but "patronage" has its stress on the fourth ictus, so in that case the rhyming syllable is unstressed – creating heterotonic rhyme, where the rhyme vowel is stressed in one word but not the other. In lines two and three the final ictus corresponds with "-ing" but the rhyme vowel appears on the preceding syllable in "nothing" and two syllables earlier in "embodying": hence, the rhyme vowels appear on different syllables in the line and neither syllable corresponds with the final ictus.

While Larkin does not usually make the clausula an integral part of his stanza structures, he does so in both the four-stanza "Here" (1961; Larkin 2012: 49) and the three-stanza "Naturally the Foundation will Bear Your Expenses" (1961; Larkin 2012: 52), where the feminine and masculine rhymes appear at fixed places in the stanzas. The latter is the only eight-line stanza poem of this period employing conventional alternate rhyming in both halves of the stanza (AbAbCdCd). The one exception appears in the second stanza, where a dactylic rhyme ("minister/sinister") replaces one of the feminine rhymes, resulting in AbAbC'DC'D. That poem also makes use of a device we have seen before, in which a rhyme involves more than one word ("Comet / from it, throw up / grow up"). In "Here" Larkin alternates his rhyme structures from one stanza to the next: stanzas 1 and 3 rhyme AbAbcDDc, 2 and 4 rhyme aBBaCdCd,. As in other poems, some of the rhymes rely on the consonants rather than the vowels for their similarity in sound: "solitude/mud, cluster/water, come/museum", and so forth.

The examples of eight-line stanzas in *The Whitsun Weddings* include the unrhymed "Afternoons" (written in 1959, thus before the period of Larkin's most intensive work with this form) along with the partially rhymed "MCMXIV" (where just the fourth and eighth lines of each stanza rhyme throughout) and "Send No Money" (only the last four lines rhyme, abab).[22] The three other instances of eight-line stanzas in this collection all employ

[22] However, the powerful first two lines in the last stanza of "MCMXIV" do rhyme ("Never such innocence, / Never before or since"), and the opening line is then embodied in the stanza's conclusion: "Never such innocence again".

unconventional structures. Both "Sunny Prestatyn" (1962; Larkin 2012: 64–65), with the rhyme scheme abcabdcd, and "Love Songs in Age" (1961; Larkin 2012: 51–2), where it is abacbcdd, contain essentially exact rhymes throughout, making the patterns easy to detect. The poems primarily employ masculine rhyme, but "Sunny Prestatyn", has a striking feminine rhyme in the first stanza: "poster / coast, a" where the word "a" goes with "hotel" in the next line, creating a strong enjambement that deflects attention from the rhyme. For its part, "Love Songs in Age" maintains a precise metrical structure for each stanza: iambic pentameter in lines 1, 3–5 and 7–8; dimeter in line 2 and trimeter in line 6. This is one of the more salient instances in which Larkin inserts one or two shorter lines within a mostly iambic pentameter stanza form, effectively calling attention to those lines and thus helping highlight certain themes within the poem. As here, he frequently places his short lines within the stanza rather than employing the more typical device of placing them at the end as an element of closure.

"Wild Oats" (1962; Larkin 2012: 68) presents an illustrative example of how it can require some effort to discern the rhyme scheme, or for that matter whether some of the lines are rhymed at all. Below is the second stanza, presented without the rhyme scheme:

> And in seven years after that
> Wrote over four hundred letters,
> Gave a ten-guinea ring
> I got back in the end, and met
> At numerous cathedral cities
> Unknown to the clergy. I believe
> I met beautiful twice. She was trying
> Both times (so I thought) not to laugh.

Discovering the pattern requires looking closely at the line endings and perhaps comparing this stanza to the two others in the poems, where at least the rhyme of lines 6 and 8 is more immediately obvious than "believe / laugh". The other rhyme pairs in this stanza are "ring / trying" (where unstressed and stressed syllables are rhymed and the pair is widely separated), "that / met" (only the final "t" suggests a rhyme") and "letters / cities" (two seemingly very different words, but with some consonants in common). The rhyme scheme thus turns out to be the same as in "Sunny Prestatyn": abcabdcd. The predominance of enjambement, the irregularity of the rhythm and the masking of the rhyme (a result of both the unusual scheme and the lack of exact rhymes) all make the stanza read almost as prose. Yet for Larkin the structure imposed by

the rhyme scheme was clearly important. His first draft of the poem already has all the final words of each line in place for the first stanza and most of the final words for the second (Tolley 1997: 146). The repeated patterning in each stanza of the ways in which words echo imparts a subtle symmetry and organization that serves as a counterpoint to the absence of a clear metrical framework.

Several of these poems in eight-line stanzas are among Larkin's major achievements, and that goes as well for some of the works discussed below in stanzas of still greater length. Alan Brownjohn (1975: 25) has gone so far as to claim that works in stanzas containing eight or more lines "are the vehicle of Larkin's major statements in poetry". Thus the devising of intricate and uncommon stanzas often went hand in hand with the attention and effort placed into what would turn out to be among Larkin's most significant poems.

IV. Long Stanzas

If the absolute number of poems that Larkin writes in stanzas longer than eight lines is relatively limited – 21 of the 339 stanzaic poems surveyed for this article – he nonetheless works with such forms more frequently than most poets and in some cases comes up with intricate rhyme schemes, particularly during the mature years of his career. In all, he has six poems with nine-line stanzas, seven with ten-line, two with eleven-line, three with twelve-line, and one each with stanzas containing thirteen, sixteen and twenty lines. As with the other stanza types discussed, he begins trying out these long forms near the start of his career, albeit not always with ideal results in terms of either form or content. Such is the case with the first of two poems grouped under the title "Dances in Doggerel" (1941; Larkin 2012: 197–198), which consists of two twenty-line stanzas written in rhymed couplets: aabbcc... More accomplished is "Spring Warning" (1940; Larkin 2012: 100–101), first published in the year when it was written. It contains two nine-line stanzas, rhyming abbacddcc. If one or two lines in the poem seem somewhat forced, the portrayal of emerging spring ("And the walker sees the sunlit battlefield / Where winter was fought: the broken sticks in the sun") makes a strong impression. The pattern of rhymes is relatively unoriginal for Larkin: it resembles an eight-line stanza in enclosed rhyme (abbacddc) with an extra "c" rhyme tacked on at the end. The actual rhymes are more original than the scheme. Such combinations as "battlefield/scaffold" and "joy/jeer" are examples of Larkin's early attempts at approximate rhyme. In both stanzas the three "c" rhyme words – "flag / jig

/ gag", "forge / badge / gorge" – exhibit a tension between the exact first and third instances of the rhyme set and the approximate second.

Larkin's apprenticeship with both approximate rhyme and stanza structure is evident in "To a Friend" (1939; Larkin 2012: 142), with two ten-line stanzas, of which this is the second:

In the nightmare of the years,	a
And the torment of the hours,	b
May the summer rest on you	c
With a trace of former flowers,	b
As the evening breeze repairs	a
Rakings of a year repass;	d
And the kiss that stays as true	c
Bring to you instinctive peace,	e
Something of the careless grace	e
That rests upon the summer grass.	d

As Adam Kirsch (2005: 9) has pointed out, Auden's "Lullaby" ("Lay your sleeping head, my love...") "spawns" this poem by Larkin, who at this stage of his career "practices Auden's half-rhymes." Indeed, in Auden's first stanza alone, along with an instance of exact rhyme ("away / day") he rhymes "love / grave", "arm / from" and even "lie / me" (Auden 1991: 157), providing the inspiration for rhymes like "years / repairs" and "peace / grace" in Larkin. What is more, Larkin not only employs the same trochaic tetrameter as in "Lullaby", but also precisely reproduces Auden's unusual rhyme scheme, which can be seen as a precursor of Larkin's later formulations of intricate stanza structures.

As can happen when the rhyming is very approximate, it is not always immediately obvious as to what rhymes with what. Once again, we have "shadow rhyme", the term coined by Vadim Baevsky (1972), where more than one reading of the rhyme scheme becomes possible because words in different rhyme pairs are roughly as close to each other in terms of sound as those that are meant to rhyme. Consider the final three lines in Larkin's stanza, concluding with the words "peace", "grace", and "grass". At first glance, it could appear that all three words are meant to rhyme, or that "grace" and "grass" are the more likely rhyme pair than "peace" and "grace". Only by looking back at the full stanza (and perhaps comparing it to the other stanza) does the rhyme scheme become evident. Something similar occurs in the first stanza, where line 1 ends with "delight". Is that meant to rhyme with "lie" "mortality", or "fate", words that conclude three of the next four lines? (In fact, the scheme dictates that the rhyme is with "fate".) With these shadow rhymes Larkin makes the

perception of the rhyme scheme even more challenging than in the Auden poem.

At about the same time that he composed "To a Friend", Larkin created two additional poems that are remarkably similar to it: "Watch, my dear, the darkness now..." (1939; Larkin 2012: 138) and "Falling of these early flowers..." (1939; Larkin 2012: 149). Besides the resemblances in tone and to an extent subject matter, both again consist of two ten-line stanzas with precisely the same rhyme scheme as "To a Friend". Additionally, both – except for a couple of lines in the latter –are in trochaic tetrameter (not the most common meter in Larkin's verse as a whole), and both once more contain some very approximate rhymes. Whatever he may have felt about the stanza structure and rhymes, Larkin eventually concluded, as he did with so much of his early work, that all three poems were unsatisfactory – though he used stronger language – in terms of content (Larkin 2012: 520, 522, 525–526). Less than a year later, Larkin composed two poems in twelve-line stanzas, "Through darkness of sowing..." and "Poem" (1940; Larkin 2012: 148, 155). Once again, both works employ the same unusual stanza structure (it is aababbccdcdd, with the pattern of the stanza's first half repeated in the second half), contain some very approximate rhyming, and utilize quite short lines. It would appear Larkin was still under Auden's formal, as well as thematic, influence.

The prevalence of approximate rhyming appears as well in both works from *The North Ship* with long stanzas. "Winter" (1943–1944 [?]; Larkin 2012: 8–9) seems strained in much of its imagery but is of interest for its rare use of an eleven-line stanza:

In the field, two horses,	a
Two swans on the river,	b
While a wind blows over	b
A waste of thistles	a
Crowded like men;	c
And now again	c
My thoughts are children	c
With uneasy faces	d
That awake and rise	e
Beneath running skies	e
From buried places.	d

Essentially the stanza consists of two quatrains separated by a triplet of "c" rhymes. The poem is notable for the way in which some of the rhyme words are repeated over its three stanzas: "faces" occurs in the next stanza (where it

rhymes with "unlooses"), while both "face" and "place" appear in stanza three, which again has "thistles" (this time rhymed with "whistles"). Each stanza consists of a single sentence, with the first part of the sentence describing a scene in nature and the second the notion to which that scene gives rise.

A rhyme triplet also figures prominently in the two nine-line stanzas of "Like the train's beat..." (1943–1944 [?]; Larkin 2012: 11):

Like the train's beat	a
Swift language flutters the lips	b
Of the Polish airgirl in the corner seat.	a
The swinging and narrowing sun	c
Lights her eyelashes, shapes	b
Her sharp vivacity of bone.	c
Hair, wild and controlled, runs back:	d
And gestures like these English oaks	d
Flash past the windows of her foreign talk.	d

In this stanza – but not so regularly in the second – the syntax combines with the rhyme scheme to delineate sets of lines: aba / cbc / ddd. Larkin further orders the stanza by placing the shortest line at the start, giving the stanza an abrupt beginning. The first line is followed by varying rhythms over the next several, then lines in iambic tetrameter, and finally a concluding pentameter line. Much of the second stanza is then in regular iambs, mostly tetrameters, before two shorter lines at the end impart an abruptness that mirrors the start. This is not yet the mature Larkin at work, but the poem reveals a growing care for structuring his stanzas in ways that coordinate with and emphasize aspects of the content.

"Church Going" (1954; Larkin 2012: 35–37), with its seven nine-line stanzas, is the longest poem in *The Less Deceived* and one of Larkin's most celebrated works.[23] It concludes as follows:

A serious house on serious earth it is,	a
In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,	b
Are recognised, and robed as destinies.	a
And that much never can be obsolete,	b
Since someone will forever be surprising	c

[23] One of Larkin's other poems in nine-line stanzas also deals with a church, the less accomplished "A Stone Church Damaged by a Bomb" (1943; Larkin 2012: 107).

A hunger in himself to be more serious,	a
And gravitating with it to this ground,	d
Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in,	c
If only that so many dead lie around.	d

The formal effects here are more subtle than in many of the earlier poems employing long stanzas. Larkin keeps the stanza tightly unified by placing the third "a" rhyme after the first "c" rhyme; had the two been reversed, the stanza would have read like a five-line and four-line unit grouped together. The rhymes throughout the poem are mostly exact. In this stanza the most distinctive rhymes are "surprising / wise in", where one of the rhymes is spread over two words, and "is / destinies / serious", with different vowel sounds in each rhyme word and a varying number of syllables. Most stanzas in "Church Going" have frequent enjambement, and in four instances there is enjambement between stanzas as well. The widely varying lengths of clauses and sentences that occur result in a more natural flow of the utterances. At the same time, as in other works by Larkin, the sheer frequency of enjambement creates a tension between the syntax and the boundaries suggested by the rhyme. In contrast, this final stanza has only a single line that does not end with punctuation; as Timms (1973: 82) has pointed out, this is the most significant of several devices that "emphasize the seriousness" of the poem's concluding passage – one more instance of Larkin using the form of a stanza to impart a sense of closure.[24]

Another fine poem, "To the Sea" (1969; Larkin 2012: 75), which opens the collection *High Windows*, is composed in four linked nine-line stanzas. It begins as follows:

To step over the low wall that divides	a
Road from concrete walk above the shore	b
Brings sharply back something known long before –	b
The miniature gaiety of seasides.	a
Everything crowds under the low horizon:	c
Steep beach, blue water, towels, red bathing caps,	d

[24] Note that "Dockery and Son" also creates closure in its last stanza by sharply reducing the amount of enjambement. Larkin's own reading of "Church Going" emphasizes the line endings with pronounced pauses after all the lines with punctuation and even includes a slight pause after "surprising" in line 5, almost as though it ended with a comma rather than being connected to the next line through enjambement. URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pjC5xQIOrTg (accessed 7 June 2022).

The small hushed waves' repeated fresh collapse	d
Up the warm yellow sand, and further off	e
A white steamer stuck in the afternoon –	c
Still going on, all of it, still going on!	f
To lie, eat, sleep in hearing of the surf	e
(Ears to transistors, that sound tame enough	e
Under the sky), or gently up and down	f
Lead the uncertain children, frilled in white	g
And grasping at enormous air, or wheel	h
The rigid old along for them to feel	h
A final summer, plainly still occurs	i
As half an annual pleasure, half a rite,	g

The stanza starts off as though it is quite regular, with the enclosed abba rhyme and then the beginning of what would appear to be another enclosed rhyme: cdd. However, the other part of the "c" rhyme appears only in line 9, and line 8 at first seems unrhymed. It turns out, though, that Larkin rhymes the eighth line in each of the first three stanzas of this four-stanza poem with the second and third lines of the next stanza (in the last stanza the eighth line rhymes with the fifth and ninth), a link that is partly obscured by the approximate nature of the rhyme. For that matter, the rhymes words in lines 5 and 9 of the first stanza are sufficiently similar to those in lines 1 and 4 of stanza 2 that they could be seen as belonging to the same rhyme set. However, this is essentially a case of shadow rhyme: the third stanza clarifies that Larkin only intends to link the eighth line of each stanza with rhyme words of the next.[25]

Just as *The Whitsun Weddings* contains some of Larkin's most skillful examples of eight-line stanzas, so too does it include three of his more significant works in stanza forms of still greater length. The collection's title poem (1958; Larkin 2012: 56–58), with its eight ten-line stanzas, is the longest that Larkin himself published (although he wrote several longer works that remained in manuscript form). As in "Dockery and Son" and "Like the train's beat", a journey by rail is at the heart of "The Whitsun Weddings", which concludes:

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[25] Though Miyauchi (2002: 61) points out that what I am calling an instance of shadow rhyme also extends to the first and fourth rhyme words of stanza 3, with similar sounds to the "f" rhyme in stanza 2 and the "c" rhyme in stanza 1. Given the care with which Larkin worked out his rhyme schemes, I am more inclined to see this as a chance similarity, whereas the links between line 8 of one stanza and lines 2 and 3 of the next are consistent throughout the poem.

There we were aimed. And as we raced across	a
Bright knots of rail	b
Past standing Pullmans, walls of blackened moss	a
Came close, and it was nearly done, this frail	b
Travelling coincidence; and what it held	c
Stood ready to be loosed with all the power	d
That being changed can give. We slowed again,	e
And as the tightened brakes took hold, there swelled	c
A sense of falling, like an arrow-shower	d
Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain.	e

The form here is almost classic. The rhymes are exact, while their pattern recalls that found frequently in the odes of Keats – albeit, in contrast to Keats, Larkin makes much more frequent use of enjambement between lines and also employs enjambement between most of his stanzas.[26] Keats not only keeps his stanzas and the great majority of his lines self-contained, but he also usually (though not always) has a break in the syntax and theme after the fourth line and sometimes after the seventh, creating a structure that works in harmony with the rhyme scheme. Larkin on the other hand makes the structure implied by the rhyme serve virtually as a counterpoint to the thematic and syntactic boundaries within the poem. The meter is the familiar iambic pentameter in all but the second line of each stanza, where the abrupt appearance of iambic dimeter seizes the reader's attention and serves as a focal point.

Formally resembling "The Whitsun Weddings" is "Aubade" (1977; Larkin 2012: 115–116), which appeared in *The Times Literary Supplement* three years after Larkin's last book of poetry was published. One difference is that in "Aubade" Larkin does not allow enjambement between stanzas but closes them with a period. The rhyme scheme differs but is again relatively straightforward: ababccdeed. The pattern, like that of "The Whitsun Weddings", recalls the ode, and he may have borrowed it from one or more of its frequent occurrences in eighteenth-century English poetry, such as in Thomas Gray's "Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College" and "Ode on the Spring", John Langhorne's "Ode to the River Eden", or Mark Akenside's "Ode to the Country Gentlemen of England". Larkin also could have noticed the rhyme scheme in a poem closer to his own time, such as Hardy's ode "Compassion" (Hardy 2001: 822–823).

[26] John Reibetanz (1976: 532) has compared the autonomous stanzas used by Keats in "Ode on a Grecian Urn" to the relatively unbroken movement in "The Whitsun Weddings", where all the stanzas have the exact same rhyme scheme and are frequently not syntactically independent. Keats does use the rhyme scheme ababcdecde consistently in his "Ode to a Nightingale".

In terms of meter, "Aubade" has the same iambic pentameter in nine of the ten lines in each of its five stanzas, with the penultimate line, rather than the second, being shorter than the rest. If Larkin makes effective use of short lines elsewhere (including, as we have just seen, in "The Whitsun Weddings") here they carry special weight. Those lines on their own – "Of dying, and being dead," / "Not to be anywhere," / "Nothing to love or link with," / "Let no one off the grave." / "Work has to be done." – convey a chillingly vivid precis of the entire poem.

The Whitsun Weddings contains a second poem in ten-line stanzas, "Faith Healing" (1961; Larkin 2012: 53–54), where the rhyme scheme is far more typical of Larkin than Keats: abcabdabcd. That said, the very use of a ten-line stanza suggests the odic tradition, and Booth (2014: 247) has detected the possible echo of a notion from one of Thomas Gray's odes in Larkin's concluding lines. The rhymes could suggest a roughly tripartite structure to each stanza – abc / abd / abcd – but once again the syntax has little relationship to the ordering of the rhymes or for that matter to line endings in general: there is no punctuation at the end of the first nine lines in the second stanza, and then only a dash rather than a full stop after line 10. For that matter, it might take a moment for the reader even to realize that the poem, once again written in iambic pentameter, is rhymed: the paucity of stops at line endings along with the separation of each rhyme pair by at least two lines has the effect of obscuring the links between the rhyming words, even though the rhymes are exact.

Even greater difficulty for perceiving the underlying scheme is posed by "Essential Beauty" (1961; Larkin 2012: 69), which contains two sixteen-line stanzas – the longest stanza in *The Whitsun Weddings* and the longest to be found in any of Larkin's published poetry. He again avoids the temptation to build a long stanza out of easily replicable constituents, such as repeated quatrains, with the result that many readers are likely to see the rhyming as more or less random and not realize that it adheres to a carefully worked-out pattern. The first stanza displays an original and elaborate sequence – abacbd-decfegfhhg – that is repeated exactly in the second stanza. Note that some of the rhyme pairs are widely separated: four lines intervene before the first "c" rhyme becomes joined by its companion, while three lines separate the two "g" rhymes. Larkin makes the second half of the stanza *almost* a repetition of the first, and indeed the scheme would break down into two identical eight-line schemas if the "e" and "c" rhymes in lines 8 and 9 switched places: abacbddc + efegfhhg. Quite possibly, Larkin purposely placed those rhymes as he did in lines 8 and 9 to avoid such an exact duplication and instead ensure that the

entire stanza would form a single entity.[27] Fourteen of the sixteen lines in the stanzas are in iambic pentameter, with iambic tetrameter in the ninth line of each perhaps marking the transition into the second half and, as in "Aubade", iambic trimeter in the penultimate line.

The last poem that Larkin composed for *The Whitsun Weddings* was "Dockery and Son", which he completed in March 1963. That June he set to work on "The Dance" (Larkin 2012: 306–309), which, had he finished the poem, would have been the longest he wrote. As it is, he wrote twelve eleven-line stanzas before setting the work aside in May 1964.[28] Below is the poem's fourth stanza, with the lines immediately preceding and following that stanza included to provide context for its opening and end:

Professional colleagues do
Assemble socially, and are entertained

By sitting dressed like this, in rooms like these,	a
Saying I can't guess what – just fancy, when	b
They could be really drinking, or in bed,	c
Or listening to records – so, instead	c
Of waiting till you look my way, and then	b
Grinning my hopes, I stalk your chair	d
Beside the deafening band, where raised faces	e
Sag into silence at my standing there,	d
And your eyes greet me over commonplaces,	e
And your arms are bare,	d
And I wish desperately for qualities	a

Moments like this demand, and which I lack.

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[27] Note that Larkin similarly unifies his stanzas in, for instance, "Church Going" and "To the Sea". Had "Church Going" rhymed ababacdcd, the rhymes would have suggested a 5+4 structure, but instead the ababcadcd pattern, with the first "c" rhyme placed before the last "a", causes the sequence to appear as a single entity. Similarly, in "to the Sea" he places the orphan line that serves to link the stanzas in the penultimate line instead of at the end, so we have abbacddec in the first stanza instead of consecutive sequences of enclosed rhyme.

[28] The twelve full stanzas were first published in Larkin 1989: 154–158. Bullock (Larkin 2012: 309) adds a half dozen lines from a late draft that would have been part of a thirteenth stanza; however, he does so without leaving a space between those lines and the end of the twelfth. A couple of additional lines appeared in a previous draft (Larkin 2012: 637), but only those first twelve stanzas were ever completed.

The formal qualities of "The Dance" are largely familiar from other poems written during Larkin's mature period that employ long stanzas. The rhyme is exact, and frequent enjambement at times obscures the line endings. The predominant meter is yet again iambic pentameter, but with some effectively placed shorter iambic lines: the penultimate line, as in two of the poems just discussed, is iambic trimeter, and, perhaps less obviously, the sixth line is a tetrameter. Thus, the deded sequence both begins and ends with the two shorter lines. Nearly all the stanzas have clear enjambement after that shorter sixth line (the exception is the eighth, with a dash at that point) – as though signaling a rush into the last five lines. The penultimate lines often call attention to themselves by both their brevity and, as in "Aubade", their content: "The impact, open, raw," / "The tense elation turned" / "Unfolds some crazy scheme". They also serve as compelling leads into an eleventh line that frequently contains a particularly forceful statement, even as enjambement forces the reader not to linger but to continue on to the next stanza. The most distinctive aspect, though, is the stanza form itself: Larkin's oeuvre contains only one other stanza of that length, in "Winter". There the structure (ababcccdeed) resembles two quatrains surrounding a rhyme triplet. Here the patterning (abccbdededa) lacks such regularity, with its most unusual feature the extreme distance between the two "a" rhyme words, which are separated by the other nine lines (and four rhyme sets) in the stanza. Thanks to that feature, this stanza stands out among all Larkin's unusual constructions.

"The Old Fools" (1973; Larkin 2012: 81–82), from *High Windows*, represents one of Larkin's last attempts at a long stanza. The second of its four twelve-line stanzas reads as follows:

At death, you break up: the bits that were you	a
Start speeding away from each other for ever	b
With no one to see. It's only oblivion, true:	a
We had it before, but then it was going to end,	c
And was all the time merging with a unique endeavor	b
To bring to bloom the million-petalled flower	d
Of being here. Next time you can't pretend	c
There'll be anything else. And these are the first signs:	e
Not knowing how, not hearing who, the power	d
Of choosing gone. Their looks show that they're for it:	f
Ash hair, toad hands, prune face dried into lines –	e
How can they ignore it?	f

Typically, Larkin had worked out the rhyme scheme near the very start of composing the poem. That ordering of the rhymes was retained even as he abandoned the original version of his opening stanza (Tolley 1997: 134). What he had come up with was yet another original sequence seemingly so random that some may not discern the rhymes immediately, even though they are exact. Indeed, as Richard Murphy (1975: 33) commented, "You have to look back over what you have just finished reading [...] before you can say for certain, 'Yes, it rhymes'." Further examination reveals an underlying elegant pattern. The first and last rhyme pairs are separated by a single line (aba / fef), but then two lines come between each of the other rhyme pairs (bacb / cbdc / dced / edfe). Such a symmetrical structure would hardly have come about by accident. In this poem too Larkin inserts a short line – this time at the end rather than internally – into what is otherwise a basically iambic pentameter stanza. Typically, these short lines call attention to themselves as much for their content as for the change in meter. The concluding line of the entire poem is the very shortest – "We shall find out" – but also possibly the most impactful, for reminding readers that they too face the frailties of old age. Notably, the poem's rhythm does not just vary at the points where these short lines are inserted. Larkin can be somewhat free in his use of meter, taking full advantage of the variations permitted in English iambs to add a syllable here and there or to shift stress onto a normally weak syllable (Timms 1973: 107). In "The Old Fools" he has an unusually high percentage of lines with more than the usual ten or eleven syllables for the iambic pentameter – to the point that a strict metrical interpretation of the poem would likely label it as resembling the Russian *dolnik*, where either one or two weak syllables can separate each strong syllable in the line. In the above stanza, line 2 has 12 syllables and reads like regular amphibrachic tetrameter. Lines 3 and 4 have thirteen syllables with a break after the fifth: the first part of the line resembles amphibrachic dimeter (xXxxX), with the section after the break having the form of amphibrachic trimeter (xXxxXxxX). Line 5 then has fourteen syllables with a rhythm that differs from the preceding two lines. Only with line 6 does the iambic pentameter reemerge. These variations, appearing at different points in each of the stanzas, unsettle the flow, in keeping with the discomfiting mood of the entire poem.

V. Conclusion

To be sure, not every poem exhibits the virtuosity in stanza construction that has been the chief focus of this article. Larkin composed works that lack rhyme, some that are at most "quasi-stanzaic," and still others that lack any organized division into stanzas. He also has his share of poems that employ quite conventional stanza forms, including some of his best-known works. He uses quatrains that rhyme abab in "Toads" from *The Less Deceived*, while "Toads Revisited" in *The Whitsun Weddings* has aabb quatrains.[29] The abab quatrain appears as well in "Mr. Bleaney," one of Larkin's best-liked poems (not least by the author himself) and in the relatively late "Cut Grass", referred to by Booth (2104: 366) as an "exquisite lyric". However, even in those poems that seemingly lack strict stanzas or that employ the most familiar forms, it is often possible to detect a scrupulous concern with the poem's structure. Recall the progression from iambic dimeter to iambic trimeter that takes place over the stanzas in "Cut Grass". Or take "Absences" (1950; Larkin 2012: 42), a poem from *The Less Deceived* that could hardly be defined as stanzaic, with its ten lines divided by spaces into groups of six, three and one. Rhyme links the second group to the first, but the final line ("Such attics cleared of me! Such absences!") is both unrhymed and stands on its own typographically. This singling out of a last line occurs in the poem just before it in that collection ("I Remember, I Remember") and, for instance, in "The Card-Players," where the last line similarly consists of two exclamations, forming a compelling closure to the poem.

The concern with structure in general, and with stanza form in particular, began virtually at the start of Larkin's career. Even as a teenager he was testing various possibilities, whether inventing his own stanzas or, on occasion, imitating those of others. Most of the characteristic features of his stanzas already emerge during these early years: complex rhyme schemes, frequent enjambement between lines and even between stanzas, the use of approximate rhyme, the occurrence of palindromic patterns (abccba), and linked stanzas. However, by the time of his three most important collections of poetry his use of stanzas has evolved. In his sonnets he abandons the Shakespearean model, which he had used sparingly in any case, and instead turns toward variations on the Petrarchan model in both his unpublished and published sonnets. He finds a wealth of variations in the concluding sextet and, at times, as in the two

[29] In a letter Larkin (2012: 407) noted this change, calling it a "different metre" rather than a different stanza and in his description of the rhyme pattern referring specifically to the prevalence in both poems of approximate rhyme, which appears to have been a considered choice.

sonnets from *High Windows*, deviates from the 8+6 typographical division. The iambic pentameter remains intrinsic to his sonnets, and that meter comes to be associated with many of his most significant poems, particularly when they are written in the longer stanza forms: it appears in "I Remember, I Remember" with its five-line stanzas, in the seven-line stanzas of "The Building", in the eight-line stanzas of "Dockery and Son" and "Here", in the nine-line stanzas of "Church Going" and "To the Sea", in the 10-line stanzas of "Faith Healing", "The Whitsun Weddings", and "Aubade", as well as in the twelve-line stanzas of "The Old Fools". An associated development is the inclusion of short lines within stanzas of at least eight lines that basically employ iambic pentameter, as in "Love Songs in Age", "The Whitsun Weddings", "Aubade", "The Old Fools", "Essential Beauty", and the unpublished "The Dance". Larkin's stanzas of whatever length come to be generally more complex. Thus, in his later poetry, even his three-line stanzas contain novel combinations, seemingly inspired by *terza rima*. The five-line stanzas in *The Less Deceived* are more unconventional and often more painstakingly constructed than those that appear in his earlier poetry, while the six-line stanzas of the final two collections display an impressive variety. His seven-line stanzas in the later poems are generally interlocking, sometimes in intricate ways. And perhaps Larkin's most unusual creations are those rhyme schemes that do not coincide with stanza length, yet another technique that achieves full refinement only at the time of the three final collections.

These striking and highly varied linked stanzas in Larkin's oeuvre deserve special mention. While Larkin experimented with such forms early in his career – as in "Midsummer Night, 1940" and "The Wind at Creep of Dawn" 1941 – from the 1950s on they assume a greater significance in his oeuvre. The following list – arranged by stanza length, and within each stanza length by date – illustrates their variety:

"Midsummer Night, 1940":	abc cba bde edb def fed ...
"This triumph ended...":	xxa bab cbc dbd bd
"For Sidney Bechet":	aba bcd cde fef (3-line stanzas, 4-line rhyme scheme)
"A Sense of Shape":	aba cbc dbd... (each stanza contains the b rhyme)
"Behind Time"	aba bcb... (*terza rima*)
"Whatever Happened":	aba bcb cde ded ee (*terza rima* sonnet)
"Sad Steps":	aba bba... (3-line stanzas, 6-line rhyme scheme)
"Talking in Bed":	axa bab cbc cdd
"The Dead City":	abcd dcba... (same rhymes used for all six stanzas)
"The wind at creep of dawn":	abaa bbcd ccdd (4-line stanzas, 6-line rhyme scheme)
"The Spirit Wooed":	xaab xccd xeeb xffd xggb

"Wires":	abcd dcba
"Arrivals, Departures":	abbac ddcef feggg (5-line stanzas, 4-line rhyme scheme)
"I Remember, I Remember":	abccb aabcd effed... (5-line stanzas, 9-line rhyme scheme)
"Love Again":	ababca dededc afafca
"Harvest of flowers...":	aabbccd eeffggd
"If hands could free you...":	ababcdd efefcgg
"Hospital Visits"	abacbcd efegfgd... (d rhyme concludes all four stanzas)
"First Sight":	ababacc dededaa
"The Building":	abcbdca dabcbdc adabcbd... (7-line stanzas, 8-line rhyme scheme)
"Breadfruit"	abacdcdb ebefafab
"To the Sea"	abbacddec feefghhij...

As is evident, Larkin strove for originality each time he turned to linked stanzas. What is more, in a half-dozen cases he employs rhyme schemes that do not coincide with stanza length, thereby impeding perception of the underlying pattern.

While stanzas with an odd number of lines are less common than those with an even number, this list makes evident that they account for the majority of Larkin's linked stanzas, and in particular of those in which the stanza length and rhyme scheme do not match. Among the poems in his published collections, only "Wires" contains linked stanzas with an even number of lines, and that poem offers a less extensive version of a scheme that Larkin had already used in "The Dead City". As for the numerous examples of stanzas with an odd number of lines, the several ways in which he manages to link three-line stanzas show an impressive inventiveness, even if he may have owed part of his inspiration to *terza rima*. Both his five-line linked stanzas contain rhyme schemes that do not match the stanza length, while a high percentage of his poems in seven-line stanzas are linked, with the complexity of such forms reaching a peak in "The Building", where the frequent enjambement further hinders perception of the poem's structure. Granted, Larkin also composed poems in stanzas with an even number of lines that have highly unusual and imaginative rhyme schemes as well as numerous instances of enjambement (e.g., "Faith Healing"). However, he appears to have taken a special interest in exploring the possibilities of odd stanzas, which feature many of his most inventive constructions.

Tolley (1997: 177) has remarked that Larkin "seems to have relished difficult stanza patterns largely for the challenge they bring". Similarly, Larkin's own comment that "I Remember, I Remember" has a rhyme scheme that "is just a piece of cleverness" no doubt has an element of truth to it. Certainly, something less labyrinthine than what appears in that poem or in "The Building" could still have resulted in a successful poem. However, his structures always serve a purpose beyond mere cleverness or enjoyment of a challenge. They may organize an arrangement of different meters, which in turn can highlight individual lines within stanzas. A shift in the rhyme pattern from one stanza to the next can signal a change in the poem's theme or focus. Very often he constructs his stanzas in such a way as to create an effective means of closure, whether by isolating a final line or introducing a different rhyme pattern.

Quite possibly the most important effect, though, is to gain the attention of the reader for the entire poem. When words that rhyme are widely separated or when rhyme pairs appear at varying intervals in the stanza, when rhyming words are only partially related by sound, when enjambement that blurs boundaries appears to be working at cross purposes with the rhyme that marks line endings, when readers sense the existence of a pattern that is not immediately obvious, it becomes necessary to consider the poem more intently. Larkin, it will be recalled, felt that a poem must be read, not just heard. His readers, and readers they should be rather than just listeners, need to be attentive to catch all that he is doing with form, and in doing so they become more profoundly engaged with the content as well.

In his review of *High Windows*, Richard Murphy (1975: 33) concludes that the volume displays how "meter and rhyme, when skillfully handled by an artist who knows how to conceal his art, can still have useful and noble functions to perform in poetry". And the same, as this article has tried to demonstrate, can be said about the stanza.[30]

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Appendix: Larkin's Sonnets

	Title	Scheme	Date	Page
P	Winter Nocturne	ababcdcdefefgg	1938	99
U	Alvis Victrix	ababcdcd / efgefg	1939	128
P	Street Lamps	ababcdcdefefgg	1939	100
U	"Having grown up in shade of Church and State..."	abbacddc / efgefg	1939	177
U	The Conscript	ababcdcd / eeffgg	1940	157
U	The Conscientious Objector	abbacddc / efegfg	1940	157
U	Schoolmaster	abbacdd / cef / efgg	1940	162
U	"The question of poetry, of course..."	ababcdcd / efeggf	1940	167
U	Rupert Brooke	A'B'B'A'CDDC / eFgF'eg	1940	168
U	"Nothing significant was really said..."	abbacddc / efgfge	1940	178
U	"At once he realized that the thrilling night..."	ababcdcd / efegfg	1940	179
P	Ultimatum	ababcdc /dee/ ffgg	1940	103
U	"Unexpectedly the scene attained...	ababcdcd / efegfg	1940	183
U	"There is no language of destruction for..."	abbaacca / ddeeff	1940	185
TNS	Conscript	abab / cdcd / efef / gg	1941	7
TNS	"This was your place of birth..."	ababcdc / d / efg / efg	1942	6
TNS	"Climbing the hill within the deafening wind..."	ababcddc / efgfeg	1944	9
TNS	"Love, we must part now; do not let it be..."	ababcacad / edfef	1943–44?	18
TNS	"So through that unripe day you bore..."	ababcdcdef / efgg	1943–44	20
P	Story	ababcdcd / efegf / g	1941	104
P	A Writer	ababcdcd / efegfg	1941	104
P	Observation	abba / cddc / efe / ggf	1941	105
U	"The world in its flowing is various; as tides..."	ababcdcdefe / gfg	1941	190

U	"Time and space were only their disguises..."	abba / cddc / efe / gfg	1941	190
U	"Sailors brought back strange stories..."	ababcdcd / eefgfg	1941	197
U	"Flesh to flesh was loving from the start..."	abca / abca / abca / dd	1942	208
U	Now	aabbccdd / eeffgg	1942	211
U	"The dead are lost, unravelled, but if a voice..."	ababcddc / efgefg	1945	249
U	Neurotics	abacbdcd / efe gfg	1949	266
U	To Failure	ababcdcd / efgfeg	1949	269
TLD	Spring	ababcdcd / eff / geg	1950	40
U	To my wife	ababcdcd / efggfe	1951	274
U	"When she came on, you couldn't keep..."	ababcdcd / efeffe	1953	280
U	Autobiography at an Air-Station	ababcdcd / efgefg	1953	286
U	"Hotter shorter days arrive, like happiness..."	ababcdcd / efgfge	1961	301
U	"And now the leaves suddenly lose strength..."	ababcdc/d/efgfeg	1961	301
U	January	ababcd / cdefggfe	1962	302
HW	"Friday Night in the Royal Station Hotel..."	ababcdcde / fgefg	1966	80
HW	The Card-Players	abbacddcefegg / f	1970	84
U	Dear Jake	ababcdcdefg / efg	1976	315

Column 1: U = Unpublished; P = Published only in journal; *TNS* = *The North Ship*; *TLD* = *The Less Deceived; HW* = *High Windows*
Column 5: Page number in Larkin 2012
"And now the leaves..." has a typographical break in the middle of line 8.