“With Meaning and Meaning’s Rebuttal”
A Contrastive Reading of Philip Larkin’s *The Less Deceived*

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Abstract
This essay focuses on Philip Larkin’s *The Less Deceived*, a collection of poems published in 1955, and tries to demonstrate how the poems within it can be organized and understood according to a contrast between more and less deceived. Through close reading and comparative analysis this overarching contrast is shown to be expressed by recurrences of imagery and thematic material as well as by a series of related opposing terms which inform many of the viewpoints expressed within the collection. These oppositions include those between illusion and disillusion, distance and proximity, surface and depth, artifice and reality as well as innocence and guilt. The essay also concludes that the overarching categories of greater and lesser deception are expressed to varying degrees by the different poems and that neither category can thus be considered as favoured above the other.
The poetry of Philip Larkin, while certainly not neglected, has not necessarily seen the most diverse of treatments by critics and scholars. Larkin’s poetry has often been discussed in terms of biography and literary influence and many attempts have been made to reconcile the literary works with the life and private convictions of Larkin himself.¹ Many readings have also taken a broad approach to the poetic works, discussing Larkin’s oeuvre as a whole with little distinction between individual collections or even between published and unpublished work. This is evident, for example, in A.T. Tolley’s *My Proper Ground: A Study of the Work of Philip Larkin and its Development* from 1991 which, as its title suggests, treats Larkin’s works primarily in chronological order of composition rather than by the contexts in which they were published. Another common method has been to organize the poems thematically, as is done by James Booth in his 2005 study *Philip Larkin: The Poet’s Plight*, who in discussing, for example, Larkin’s love poetry, groups poems from different collections along with Larkin’s private correspondence (57f). While such approaches are by no means invalid, I would argue that they risk oversimplification by reducing the, often disparate, individual poems to a single authorial viewpoint and overlooking the smaller intricacies of individual works.

With this in mind I will seek to perform a closer investigation of *The Less Deceived*, Larkin’s second collection of poetry, first published in 1955.² I will argue that the poems contained in this collection can be broadly organized and understood according to the opposing principles of “more” and “less deceived” and that this overarching contrast is in turn expressed through a series of opposing terms and viewpoints which are represented within the different poems. These opposing terms are foregrounded by frequent recurrences of imagery and thematic material which invite the reader to juxtapose the poems against each other and consider their wider implications for the collection as a whole.³ These intratextual connections will be explored by means of close reading and comparative analysis to elucidate their bearing on the overarching conflict of greater and lesser deception.

The idea of binary opposites in Larkin’s work has previously been addressed by John Osborne, who in discussing Larkin’s affinities with poststructuralism notes a tendency in certain poems towards establishing binary oppositions only to subsequently negate them (109-14). I hope to

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¹ An extensive account of the biographically oriented criticism of Larkin’s poetry can be found in John Osborne’s study *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence: A Case of Wrongful Conviction* from 2008 which also attempts to demonstrate the potentially problematic nature of the assumptions made in such criticism.

² Much has been made of the disparate origins and composition dates of the poems contained within *The Less Deceived* and of the fact that some of them were privately printed as part of other collections prior to 1955 (Booth 18ff). My investigation will largely ignore this history, in favour of treating the collection as a whole in its final published form.

³ While a full account of the collection would be beyond the scope of this essay, my investigation does address 17 of its 29 poems and should thus be representative to a significant extent.
demonstrate (without, however, making any claims regarding poststructuralism) that *The Less Deceived* embodies a similar tendency with regards to its overarching contrast but that it manifests primarily on the level of the collection as a whole rather than within individual poems. I will also show that, rather than being strictly binary, the viewpoints presented in the collection exist on a spectrum of more and less deceived and embody these concepts to varying degrees. This granularity also means that neither end of the spectrum is consistently upheld or favoured above the other but that they instead exist in a perpetual state of tension.

The titular concept of *The Less Deceived* may not initially seem overly conspicuous or significant beyond its, perhaps puzzling, implication that deception can be measured by quantifiable degrees. The notion has been understood by A.T. Tolley as broadly referring to the way in which “experience constantly deceives us” (84), which would seem by implication to mark the state of being less deceived as a desirable one. Such a conclusion is somewhat complicated, however, when the phrase is examined in its original context of the title-poem “Deceptions”, which marks a natural starting point for closer examination of the collection.

“Deceptions” is introduced by an epigraph from Henry Mayhew’s *London Labour and the London Poor*, a work of journalism published in the mid-nineteenth century, in which a young woman describes being drugged and raped. The poem itself goes on to address this woman and assert that she was the “less deceived, out on that bed, / Than he was” (Larkin 67). This statement is significant both in that it associates lesser deception with violation, disillusion and loss of innocence but also because it marks the rapist as more deceived than the young woman who was, in the words of the epigraph, “drugged” and “ruined” (Larkin 67). Janice Rossen, who investigates Larkin’s portrayal of women, sees this appraisal of relative deception as a “problematic” kind of “detachment” from the woman’s suffering which reveals an underlying “callousness” and “sadism” (152ff). I would argue, however, that these aspects of distance and detachment, as well as their converse terms of proximity and engagement, tie into the larger thematic organization of *The Less Deceived* and yield a very different meaning when juxtaposed against other poems of the collection.

The ideas of distance and proximity are also important to “Lines on a Young Lady’s Photograph Album”, for example, which can be said to connect to “Deceptions” in several ways. Both poems address a female who is temporally distant from the speaker but whose presence is made manifest through a mediating object (Mayhew’s investigations and a private photograph album respectively). The partaking of these objects is in both cases associated with imagery of eating, but where the subject of “Deceptions” can only hesitantly “taste the grief” (Larkin 67) the counterpart of “Lines...” goes rather further, so as to “choke on such nutritious images” (Larkin 43). This seems a clear antithesis to the seeming detachment of “Deceptions” and signals a sense of proximity and
engagement on the part of the speaker of “Lines”. This sense of comparative abundance and proximity carries through the entire poem for, while its common imagery invites comparison to “Deceptions”, the respective tones of the two poems could likely not be more dissimilar. Throughout “Lines...” there is an almost overflowing sense of exuberant joy and intoxication, reinforced by the frequent use of caesura and enjambment which provides the poem with a sense of increased tempo:

But o, photography! as no art is,
Faithful and disappointing! that records
Dull days as dull, and hold-it smiles as frauds,
And will not censor blemishes
Like washing-lines, and Hall’s-Distemper boards, (Larkin 43)

The focus on such, normally less pleasant, aspects of photography further foregrounds the jubilant tone and the subject’s happiness is explicitly tied to the sense “That this is a real girl in a real place, // In every sense empirically true!” (Larkin 43). Here is another seeming negation of the distanced outlook of “Deceptions”, heralded by a commitment to recognizing and accepting even the disappointing elements of life. Though tonally different, this attitude in some ways approaches the disillusioned lesser deception depicted in “Deceptions”.

The apparent commitment to engagement and participation is complicated, however, with the subsequent question “Or is it just the past?” (Larkin 43; original emphasis). Rather than the factuality of the “young lady” it is now her temporal estrangement which becomes the attraction and she is claimed to “Contract my heart by looking out of date” (Larkin 44). In this shift of focus to the past is found one of the more instructive contrasts with “Deceptions” as it introduces a similar notion of detachment to that which was noted by Rossen. The subject of “Lines...” focuses on the past as allowing freedom from obligation and responsibility:

[…] we cry
Not only at exclusion, but because
It leaves us free to cry. We know what was
Won’t call on us to justify
Our grief […] (Larkin 44; original emphasis)

This attitude signals a clear distancing motion as well as an unwillingness to be held accountable in
any way and undermines the initial celebration of reality. I would argue that this refusal of responsibility stands in sharp contrast to the attitude held by the speaker of “Deceptions”, which has a clear sense both of responsibility but also of a failure to live up to this responsibility, as illustrated by the admission that “I would not dare / Console you, if I could”, the rhetorical question of “What can be said [?]” and the exasperated realization that “you would hardly care / That you were less deceived” (Larkin 67). When taken together it would thus seem that the subject “Deceptions” is actually more prepared to directly face and engage with reality than is the case in “Lines...”, a fact which becomes especially clear with regards to the poems’ respective characterizations of the past. In “Lines...” it is said of the past that it “holds you like a heaven” and the assertion is made that “you lie / Unvariably lovely there, / Smaller and clearer as the years go by” (Larkin 44). Despite nominally celebrating the sense of reality surrounding the eponymous photograph album the speaker of “Lines...” has thus made it, in the words of James Booth, an idealized and “unchanging Platonic Form” (69f). “Deceptions” instead frames the past in destructive terms: “Slums, years, have buried you” (Larkin 67). It is thus clear that, despite initial appearances, “Deceptions” is actually more closely engaged with reality than “Lines” and that this willingness marks its viewpoint as a disillusionsioned version of that presented in “Lines”. In keeping with the above noted connection of lesser deception and disillusion it consequently becomes apparent how the opposition of engagement and detachment can become a marker of lesser or greater deception as embodied by “Deceptions” and “Lines...” respectively.

The notion that “Lines...” provides the complementary illusion to the disillusion of “Deceptions” (and that this is an indicator of its greater deception) is furthered by the pervasive sense of artifice and superficiality which is manifest throughout the poem. The title, “Lines on a Young Lady’s Photograph Album”, draws attention to the poem’s status as a constructed and artificial thing, as does the aforementioned intricate form and the overtly “poetic” formulas such as “o, photography!” (Larkin 43). The dual meaning of “lie” in the assertion that “you lie / Unvariably lovely there” (Larkin 44) also introduces a note of uncertainty as pointed out by Osborne (127). The motif of photography further ensures that only surface-level contact is maintained; the speaker’s eye “hunger from pose to pose” and explicit reference is made to “her face” (Larkin 43). “Deceptions”, by contrast, exhibits a clear sense of proximity to the woman being addressed:

And light, unanswerable and tall and wide,
Forbids the scar to heal, and drives
Shame out of hiding. All the unhurried day
Your mind lay open like a drawer of knives. (Larkin 67)
The mentioning of an unhealing scar makes the encounter more than skin-deep in an almost literal sense, as does the woman’s open mind and unhidden shame. It is also significant that the medium through which the speaker encounters this woman is verbal rather than visual, and that the introductory epigraph quotes her directly, meaning that she has a more direct presence than the “young lady” of “Lines...”. The contrast of more and less deceived is thus extended to also embody a conflict between surface and depth.

Another instance of the association of distance, illusion and greater deception can be found in relation to the rapist of “Deceptions” whose action is described as a “stumbling up the breathless stair / To burst into fulfilment’s desolate attic” (Larkin 67). His forcible closing of distance thus has similarly catastrophic consequences for him as for his victim, and his greater deception essentially consists in putting his illusions of fulfilment into practice and finding that reality cannot live up to them. The choice of “stumbling” emphasises the non-deliberate and ignorant nature of his greater deception and the act as a whole introduces a notion of this viewpoint as somehow being ethically deficient and grossly inconsiderate. A somewhat parallel action occurs in “Lines...” whose speaker momentarily pauses “To wonder if you’d spot the theft / Of this one of you bathing” (Larkin 44). This is a similarly unlawful partaking of the other’s body which, crucially, does not move beyond a hypothetical musing, thus retaining the poem’s distanced and carefree tone, showing the speaker to be more deceived in this aspect as well and not recognizing any ethical dimension at all.

Thus, by apprehending “Deceptions” and “Lines” as juxtaposed against each other and noting where and how they intersect, there already emerges a sense of the potentially multifaceted nature of the concepts of greater and lesser deception within the collection as a whole. For while the viewpoint held forth in “Lines...” is superficial and illusory it is nonetheless coupled with an overflowing sense of joy, and the less deceived outlook of “Deceptions”, while more grounded in reality, is seemingly without hope or consolation. This somewhat problematizes Rossen’s view that the speaker of “Deceptions” is sympathetic towards the rapist since it seems apparent that the state of greater deception is not necessarily one which invites pity and is furthermore presented as (potentially) being a deeply unethical outlook. The pairing of “Lines...” and “Deceptions” also establishes a series of interrelated opposing terms associated with greater and lesser deception which can in turn be used to extend this overarching contrast to other poems of The Less Deceived. These terms include tensions between surface and depth, artifice and reality, innocence and guilt as well as distance and proximity.

The idea of proximity has been applied more specifically to interpersonal relationships by Larkin scholar Andrew Swarbrick who notes that Larkin’s poetry often features “a self which feels
threatened by the proximity of others” (168). Swarbrick’s observation is congruent with “Latest Face” which puts forth a situation akin to that of “Lines on a Young Lady’s Photograph Album” and starts out with a similarly superficial mode of contact in the form of address to an anonymous person: “Latest face, so effortless / Your great arrival at my eyes” (Larkin 71). There is also an analogous assertion of the innocence and lack of obligation in this situation with the claim that “Admirer and admired embrace / On a useless level” (Larkin 71). The subject is depicted as being committed to maintaining a sense of careless distance, suggestive of the attitude presented in “Lines...” and thus indicative of a more deceived position.

The greater deception of the outlook presented in “Latest Face” is further enhanced by a recurrence of the preservative and static ideal present in “Line...”: “I contain your current grace, / You my judgement” (Larkin 71). By invoking “judgement” the poem more sharply brings attention to the inherent objectification of the situation being presented and once again brings to bear questions of the ethics of greater deception by highlighting a perceived power-imbalance which is also present in the epithet “Precious vagrant” (Larkin 71) and in the very act of reducing the other to merely another “face”. This patronizing undertone also has implications for “Lines...” which consists entirely of an, almost literal, objectification by reducing the addressee to the eponymous photograph album.

The power imbalance of “Latest Face” is quickly disrupted, however, and the distanced and superficial tone is swiftly exchanged for one of trepidation and fear:

[…] yet to move  
Into real untidy air  
Brings no lasting attribute –  
Bargains, suffering, and love,  
Not this always-planned salute. (Larkin 71)

The choice of “salute” again signals a certain wish for distance and formality and the potential of going beyond this “always-planned” greeting is a cause of concern. Just as the comparatively closer contact of “Deceptions” was a source of disturbance, so the unmediated presence of the person apostrophised becomes increasingly problematic:

Lies grow dark around us: will  
The statue of your beauty walk?  
Must I wade behind it, till
Something’s found – or is not found –
Far too late for turning back? (Larkin 71)

There is a strong sense of entrapment, unease and insecurity brought about by the recognition of the addressee as potentially possessing agency, the walking statue clearly signalling the impossibility of reducing this “Latest Face” to a passive object. Beyond this is also a fear, not only of making an irrevocable choice, but also of not making any choice:

[…] can
Denial of you duck and run,
Stay out of sight and double round,
Leap from the sun with mask and brand
And murder and not understand? (Larkin 71)

In these final lines the fear is given almost mythical proportions; the “Latest Face” of the first stanza is now masked, heightening the sense of dread at the unknown specifically. It is instructive to note that the switch in focus from the (supposedly) static past to the future should bring such trepidation since it once again shows expectations being betrayed by contact with reality. In this way the development of “Latest Face” somewhat parallels that of the rapist from “Deceptions” whose naïve (and ethically problematic) expectations were similarly shattered at the point of actual realization. This connection further cements the attitude presented in “Latest Face” as more deceived and reinforces the opposition of distance and proximity.

In dramatizing such a development from greater to lesser deception the subject of “Latest Face” arguably ends up being less deceived than even that of “Deceptions”, a conclusion which is somewhat nuanced, however, upon closer examination of “If, My Darling” which commences as an almost perfect inversion of “Latest Face”: “If my darling were once to decide / Not to stop at my eyes, / But to jump, like Alice, with floating skirt into my head” (Larkin 72). This immediate crossing of the eye-barrier suggests a contrastive kinship between the two poems and invites the reader to more closely consider their relationship. The elimination in “If, My Darling” of the distance which the subject of “Latest Face” attempts to uphold results in a similar sense of claustrophobic uncertainty though it is crucially not presented as an external threat but rather as something fully internalized and embodied by the speaker and subsequently discovered by the eponymous “darling”: “She would find herself looped with the creep of varying light, / Monkey-brown, fish-grey, a string of infected circles” (Larkin 72). By this radical identification with
uncertainty the poem exhibits a strong sense of proximity making its viewpoint one of lesser deception.

The internal world outlined in “If, My Darling” is in many ways antithetical to the artifice and superficiality which was observed previously with its “Grecian statue kicked in the privates” and its “incessant recital / Intoned by reality” which is “double-yoked with meaning and meaning’s rebuttal” (Larkin 72). The reappearance of “statue” further ties the poem to “Latest Face” but its almost comical treatment works to rob it of its previously fear-inducing power. The stress on reality as inescapably ambiguous and devoid of simple truth also marks the subject of “If, My Darling” as severely disillusioned, another feature of the less deceived. While this lesser deception is described in unquestionably unpleasant terms, these are potentially subverted by the final stanza of the poem:

For the skirl of that bulletin unpicks the world like a knot,
And to hear how the past is past and the future neuter
Might knock my darling off her unpriceable pivot. (Larkin 72)

The tautological appraisal of the past marks it as irrelevant and the assertion of the future being “neuter” similarly marks it as impotent and devoid of significance; in light of “Latest Face”, and its mythologised dread of the future, however, it could be argued that the “neuter” version is preferable. The subject of “Latest Face” suffers great trepidation in the face of potential corruption of some sort while the counterpart of “If, My Darling” hints at an almost sinister sense of glee in the reference to the darling’s “unpriceable pivot” and seemingly delights in the prospect of potentially being the corrupting influence. It should be noted that this is not the patronizing judgement from “on high” (as it were) which was expressed in “Latest Face” but rather represents an almost equalizing desire, as evidenced by the phrasing of “knock my darling off” (Larkin 72). Here it also becomes evident that the notion of proximity is by no means a universally threatening one in The Less Deceived, though still connected to the concept of lesser deception.

While the outlook of “Latest Face” could thus be considered less deceived than, for example, that of “Lines on a Young Lady’s Photograph Album” its uncertainty and naive dread of the unknown mark it as more deceived than “If, My Darling” where the reality behind the mask (so to speak) has been uncovered and fully internalized. This distinction is strengthened by the formal organization of the two poems as well; the three stanzas of “Latest Face” grow increasingly long in concordance with the rise in apprehension, while “If, My Darling” is laid out in uniform stanzas of three lines each. These poems thus exemplify the granularity of the distinction between lesser and greater deception which is such that the respective outlooks represented in the poems are not firmly
in one or the other category but rather exist on a continuous spectrum. They also reinforce the non-
hierarchical and multi-faceted nature of these opposites, showing that the less deceived is not by
necessity associated with powerlessness just as the more deceived is not tied to happiness by
default.

As a contrast to the fear of proximity to others observed in “Latest Face” Swarbrick also notes a
complementary worry in Larkin’s work that “without relationship with otherness the self has no
validity” (168). This dichotomy can perhaps be best observed in “Reasons for Attendance” which
extends the conflict of proximity and distance to also embody a tension between individuality and
community. The poem concerns an anonymous subject observing a group of young dancers from
afar and speculating on their eponymous reasons for attendance, which are succinctly summarized
as “sex” after which follows an immediate distancing of the speaker from the dancing crowd:

[… but what
Is sex? Surely, to think the lion’s share
Of happiness is found by couples – sheer

Inaccuracy, as far as I’m concerned. (Larkin 48)

The speaker’s own reasons for being there are instead summarized as “that lifted, rough-tongued
bell / (Art if you like) whose individual sound / Insists I too am individual” (Larkin 48). This stress
on individuality explicitly establishes a dichotomy of the communal and the solitary where the
speaker seemingly exhibits clear allegiance to the latter term. This allegiance is potentially negated
however by the final lines of the poem:

[… I stay outside,
Believing this; and they maul to and fro,
Believing that; and both are satisfied,
If no one has misjudged himself. Or lied. (Larkin 48)

This final statement has often been considered the crucial one of this poem, fundamentally
undermining the preceding assertion of individuality and introducing a profound sense of doubt.
Swarbrick asserts that the speaker’s rhetorical questioning and internal debate are clear signs of an
underlying self-deception, undermining the speaker’s previous assertions (56). This sentiment is
echoed by S.J. Perry who also detects a “radical uncertainty, ambivalence and insecurity” in the
poem (436). This self-deception, along with the preoccupation with maintaining distance, suggests a more deceived viewpoint, as does the subject’s commitment to art rather than interpersonal interaction which shows a preference to the illusory over the actual. The marked rhetoricity of the poem reinforces this greater deception, being similar to the self-conscious poeticality of “Lines…”, drawing attention to its own status as a deliberately constructed act of persuasion.

Swarbrick further interprets the concluding lines of “Reasons for Attendance” as making the idea of individuality itself illusory (Larkin 57), which in the terms of this investigation would make it a sign of greater deception. I would argue, however, that there is some ambiguity in this matter given that the speaker’s commitment to individuality is potentially undermined by the implied longing for participation in the observed communal activity expressed by the final reversal of perspective. Further insight into the conflict of individuality and community can be found by closer investigation of “Wants” which invites further reference to “Reasons for Attendance” by also invoking sex:

Beyond all this, the wish to be alone:
However the sky grows dark with invitation-cards
However we follow the printed directions of sex
However the family is photographed under the flagstaff--
Beyond all this, the wish to be alone. (Larkin 52)

Here the familial and communal elements are portrayed alternatively as threatening, trivial and without substance and there is an explicit desire for solitude. The ambiguity and rhetorical style of “Reasons for Attendance” is replaced with a dry, declarative manner of expression whose repetition and use of anaphora gives a rather world-weary impression. While implying a similarly deprecating attitude to courtship and community as was present in “Reasons for Attendance” these stylistic differences give “Wants” a greater sense of distance and detachment, which may initially seem to suggest a viewpoint of greater deception.

Such a conclusion is complicated, however, by the crucial use of the plural pronoun “we” by the speaker of “Wants”. The subject is not, in other words, defined in opposition to an anonymous mass of others (as was the case in “Reasons for Attendance”) but is rather a participant in the mode of life being described, which, just as in “Deceptions”, reveals a hidden sense of proximity beyond the apparent detachment. Thus the implied self-deception of “Reasons for Attendance” has in “Wants” been exchanged for an implied self-realization. The sense of exposing an underlying meaninglessness is strengthened in the poem’s second stanza:
Beneath it all, desire of oblivion runs:
Despite the artful tensions of the calendar,
The life insurance, the tabled fertility rites,
The costly aversion of the eyes from death -
Beneath it all, desire of oblivion runs. (Larkin 52)

This passage has been taken by Andrew Motion to express a “romantic death wish” (70); I would argue, however, that the principal mood is one of realization and resignation, though hardly of desire. The wording of “Beneath it all” as well as the adjectives “artful” and “tabled” give a sense of seeing beyond an artificial and insubstantial surface to reveal an underlying motion towards oblivion and connect the poem to the already established dichotomy of surface and depth. In this rejection of surface and recognition of reality the perspective of “Wants” is among the less deceived.

The less deceived viewpoint of “Wants” is based on the realization of communal life as illusory and empty, which would seem to mark this kind of existence as more deceived. This division risks causing contradictions however, since the subject of “Wants” is identified as participating in such a communal mode of living. The implication seems to be that the subject is less deceived in outlook but still implicitly participating in the illusion of communal and familial life. In this way “Wants” becomes an almost complete inversion of “Reasons for Attendance” whose protagonist leads the individualistic existence implicitly favoured by “Wants” but only does so by self-deception. This separation of theory and practice once again demonstrates the non-binary nature of the opposition between more and less deceived and shows how its ambiguities are made apparent in the recurring imagery and themes of the collection.

The granularity of the distinction between more and less deceived is further foregrounded upon closer examination of “Church Going”, one of the more well known of the poems in The Less Deceived, which consists largely of an extended meditation on the purpose and future of churches in which it shifts from a somewhat mocking scepticism to a more serious contemplation (Snyder 128ff). The most relevant passage for the purposes of this investigation, however, occurs towards the end when the speaker self-identifies as “Bored, uninformed, knowing the ghostly silt / Dispersed” but despite this non-religious outlook goes on to praise the church:

[…] because it held unspilt
So long and equably what since is found
Only in separation – marriage, and birth,
And death, and thoughts of these […] (Larkin 59)

Here is yet another recurrence of communal and familial imagery but this time presented in more favourable terms than in “Wants”: “A serious house on serious earth it is, / In whose blent air all our compulsions meet, / Are recognized, and robed as destinies” (Larkin 59). This high appraisal of ritual stands in sharp contrast to the “tabled fertility rites” (Larkin 52) of “Wants” and its communal nature is emphasized by a switch to the plural pronoun in reference to “our compulsions” (Larkin 59; emphasis mine).

The celebration of community and ritual implies that “Church Going” represents a more deceived outlook but this is tempered by the fact that, just as in “Wants”, the subject of “Church Going” seems aware of the fundamental emptiness of ritual. The, above noted, irreligious viewpoint put forth by the subject, when coupled with humanity’s collective desires merely being “robed as destinies” (Larkin 59; my emphasis), gives a clear recognition of the insubstantiality of ritual and communal life as has also been recognized by Osborne who names “Church Going” a celebration of the inauthentic life (99). Such an arrangement once again foregrounds the conflict of surface and depth and in some ways marks the poem as a synthesis of the conflicting viewpoints present in “Reasons for Attendance” and “Wants”; by celebrating the familial life while recognizing its superficiality the viewpoint presented in “Church Going” once again demonstrates the non-binary nature of greater and lesser deception by embodying a position somewhere in the middle.

It can thus be shown how the tension of more and less deceived permeates attitudes towards community and intra-personal relationships but I would argue that it also informs the more fundamental questions of spirituality as well. While “Church Going” was essentially secular in its treatment of religious life, a stronger sense of the spiritual dimension in The Less Deceived can be found in a poem like “Absences” (where it is not actually tied to any religion in the traditional sense):

Rain patters on a sea that tilts and sighs.
Fast-running floors, collapsing into hollows,
Tower suddenly, spray-haired. Contrariwise,
A wave drops like a wall: another follows,
Wilting and scrambling, tirelessly at play
Where there are no ships and no shallows.

Above the sea the yet more shoreless day,
Riddled by wind, trails lit-up galleries:
They shift to giant ribbing, sift away.

Such attics cleared of me! Such absences! (Larkin 70)

The opening impression of nature is imbued with a great feeling of motion and upheaval which has been identified by Swarbrick with a sense of the sublime and he also stresses its character of self-negation (68), a reductive theme which is echoed by the progressively shorter stanzas which make up the poem. The loss of self naturally brings to bear a contrast with “Wants” and its identification with community and a “desire of oblivion” (Larkin 52) though the absorption into society and family has been replaced by an encounter with the sublimity of nature. This loss of individuality, in keeping with “Wants” and “Reasons for Attendance” suggests that the sense of awe and unity with nature is a viewpoint of greater deception.

The lesser deception in “Absences” is further reinforced by the return of the marked formal features of “Lines on a Young Lady’s Photograph Album” especially with the exclamations of the final line, and by the, somewhat perplexing, image of “attics” which brings to bear “fulfilment’s desolate attic” from “Deceptions” (Larkin 67). “Absences” is thus steeped in features of greater deception and can be more firmly placed in this category when read against other poems of The Less Deceived.

A similar, though less extreme, version of the greater deception of “Absences” can be found in “Coming” which also concerns nature-oriented imagery:

On longer evenings,
Light, chill and yellow,
Bathes the serene
Foreheads of houses.
A thrush sings,
Laurel-surrounded
In the deep bare garden,
Its fresh-peeled voice
Astonishing the brickwork. (Larkin 47)

The astonishment of brickwork by means of birdsong signals both the power and the primacy of nature over civilization and takes an almost miraculous tone. This sense of sacrality is enhanced by
the preceding “bathing” of light over the “foreheads” of the houses which has the character of baptism and spiritual rebirth, more firmly connecting the poem to the ritual aspects of “Church Going” and once again suggesting greater deception. The implications of spiritual rejuvenation are further emphasized in the latter half of the poem:

It will be spring soon,
It will be spring soon –
And I, whose childhood
Is a forgotten boredom,
Feel like a child
Who comes on a scene
Of adult reconciling,
And can understand nothing
But the unusual laughter,
And starts to be happy. (Larkin 47)

The notion of a kind of reawakening is emphasized here with the doubled invocation of spring. While not self-negating to the same extent as “Absences” the regression to childhood does similarly function to emphasize the smallness of the individual in the face of the grandeur of nature. Swarbrick asserts that the disowning of a personal childhood works to intensify the emotion (67) and I would further argue that the abandonment of the personal in favour of participation in something larger echoes the loss of individuality discussed in relation to “Reasons for Attendance” and “Wants”, though again, as in “Absences”, expressed in terms of nature and not society.

Thus it becomes clear that the sublime experiences of nature, present in “Absences” and “Coming”, can both be considered a feature of the more deceived outlook. In the case of “Coming” the speaker’s identification with childhood also contributes to this status by providing a sense of innocence and naïveté about the manner of spirituality presented here. The stress on ignorant happiness also connects “Coming” to the irresponsible relationship to the past which was present in “Lines on a Young Lady’s Photograph Album” and signals a desire to remain innocent and free similar to that of “Latest Face”.

A less deceived counterpart to “Coming” can be found in the antonymically named “Going” whose opening similarly consists of the coming of evening but this time devoid of light: “There is an evening coming in / Across the fields, one never seen before, / That lights no lamps” (Larkin 51). By stressing its unseen nature it is clearly contrasted with the cyclical and recurring nature of spring
and the strong implications of death can be seen as a contrast to the positive portrayal of self-negation as seen in “Absences”. The disillusion (and thus, lesser deception) of the speaker is emphasized in the second stanza with the claim that “Silken it seems at a distance, yet / When it is drawn up over the knees and breast / It brings no comfort” (Larkin 51). By making the “silken” nature of oblivion an artefact of distance the subject approaches the viewpoint of “Wants” and further marks the respective outlooks of “Absences” and “Coming” as illusory.

The final stanzas of “Going” continue this pattern of negation by introducing nature once again:

Where has the tree gone, that locked
Earth to the sky? What is under my hands,
That I cannot feel?

What loads my hands down? (Larkin 51)

The spiritual link provided by nature in the previous poem is here established as being totally severed or lost and the abrupt shortening of the final stanza to a single line strengthens the associations of death and parallels the interruption of the cyclical nature of nature. The heaviness of hand which is mentioned could perhaps be taken as suggesting old age which would contrast with the return to childhood of “Coming” and the image also has implications of guilt as opposed to the childlike innocence of its titular counterpart. By thus asserting the incapability of nature to provide a connection to something higher, the outlook presented in “Going” is certainly among the less deceived.

It is worth stressing that the lesser deception of “Going” is still distinct both from the world-weary rejection of “Wants” and the willing inauthenticity of “Church Going”; in phrasing the concluding statements as questions, the speaker of “Going” gives a strong implication of longing for a lost spiritual dimension and, in a sense, wishes to be more deceived and to have access to a more innocent (if illusory) existence. The poem thus serves as yet another indication of the possible disappointments of the less deceived end of the spectrum.

The more deceived wish of returning to, or preserving, one’s youth and innocence, as in “Coming”, is present elsewhere within The Less Deceived as well; it is of course integral to “Lines on a Young Lady’s Photograph Album” and a similar situation is presented in “Maiden Name”, which Swarbrick sees as a “companion-piece” to “Lines...” (51). “Maiden Name” is also addressed to a woman who is swiftly revealed as having recently changed her name on account of being “confused / By law with someone else” (Larkin 53). This invocation of the transformative power of
ritual (in this case of marriage specifically) once again connects to “Church Going” and the abandonment of one’s name suggests another loss of individuality in favour of becoming one with something (or someone) external to oneself. The subject at first considers the idea that the discarded name is now “applicable to no one” and thus “wholly / Untruthful” but quickly asserts otherwise:

No, it means you. Or, since you’re past and gone,

It means what we feel now about you then:
How beautiful you were, and near, and young,
So vivid you might still be there among
Those first few days, unfingermarked again.
So your old name shelters our faithfulness,
Instead of losing shape and meaning less
With your depreciating luggage laden. (Larkin 53)

Here we see the same preservatory impulse as in “Lines...” and the presumed innocence of this idealized past is clearly signalled in the adjective “unfingermarked” as well as by the connotations of the titular word “maiden” itself and of the almost Edenic “first few days” which provide further religious undertones. This innocence is furthered by the focus on youth and its freedom from the “luggage” of age. The speaker’s outlook is thus clearly among the more deceived and the poem even employs the same double meaning of “Lines...” when the old name is described as “Lying just where you left it” (Larkin 53; my emphasis), once again hinting at the potentially naïve and illusory nature of the speaker’s viewpoint.

A less deceived outlook on the matters of age is offered in “Skin” which, rather bluntly, begins by stating, in reference to the titular epidermis, “Obedient daily dress, / You cannot always keep / That unfakable young surface” (Larkin 73). The impossibility of retaining youth is thus recognized instantly and the “unfakable” nature of this previous state casts doubt on the wish to relive or preserve youth which is integral to both “Maiden Name” and “Coming”. The middle stanza of “Skin” can be read as a further repudiation of “Maiden Name” where it is said of the skin that “You must thicken, work loose / Into an old bag / Carrying a soiled name” (Larkin 73). The previously exalted name is now “soiled” and enveloped by “an old bag” in contrast to its previously alleged freedom from “depreciating luggage” (Larkin 53). There consequently seems no chance in “Age” of escaping from the realities of the ageing process, a notion which is reinforced by the nature of the objects being discussed in it and “Maiden Name”; a name is obviously transient, immaterial and
easily exchanged while the skin is a more permanent part of the human body.

It is thus clear that the perspective of “Skin” is to be considered among the less deceived and it is worth pointing out that this realization of the inevitability of ageing is not presented with any overt trepidation or sorrow as can be exemplified by the final stanza of the poem:

And pardon me, that I  
Could find, when you were new,  
No brash festivity  
To wear you at, such as  
Clothes are entitled to  
Till the fashion changes. (Larkin 73)

The polite formula of “pardon me” gives the passage a gentle sense of irony and the faint hint of regret is diminished by the adjective “brash”, which subtly indicates that the missed festivities are not to be retroactively romanticized in any excessive manner. Such a comparatively sober appraisal of the ageing process stands as a pointed contrast to the longing for a second chance at youth and innocence which was expressed by, for example, “Going”; “Skin” thus demonstrates once again that the state of being less deceived is not inherently one of despair and that neither term of the overarching conflict is necessarily favoured.

The idea present in “Skin” of age as inescapable is itself brought into question, however, in the poem which actually bears the name of “Age”:

My age fallen away like white swaddling  
Floats in the middle distance, becomes  
An inhabited cloud. I bend closer, discern  
A lighted tenement scuttling with voices.  
O you tall game I tired myself with joining!  
Now I wade through you like knee level weeds, (Larkin 60)

In being identified with “swaddling” age is marked as a restraining influence while simultaneously being portrayed as easily shed. There is also the inherent paradox of identifying age in terms of infancy which marks it as something to be grown out of rather than accepted as a fact of life. It should also be pointed out that “Age” makes a clear distancing statement with the speaker’s previous life being placed “in the middle distance”; it is also trivialized by being conceptualized as
tiny enough to warrant a bending motion and by the diminutive connotations of “scuttle” and “weeds”. With this distancing motion “Age” connects to “Lines...” and “Latest Face”, suggesting its status as more deceived which is reinforced by the second stanza:

And they attend me, dear translucent bergs:
Silence and space. By now so much has flown
From the nest here of my head that I needs must turn
To know what prints I leave, whether of feet,
Or spoor of pads, or a bird’s adept splay. (Larkin 60)

By the attendance of “Silence and space” the poem introduces a sense of sacrality which, as in “Absences” and “Coming”, is associated with both natural imagery and a loss of personal identity. The same form of reductive motion is enacted by the outward expansion from “the nest here of my head” as well as by the final identification with animals and the associated insecurity of personal identity. In framing the freedom from age in such terms the poem suggests a return to a natural innocence. The outlook presented in “Age” thus comes to be associated with greater deception and furthermore becomes implicated in the above discussed complications regarding the potential role of nature as a conduit for transcendence, potentially inviting doubts as to the validity of its outlook.

The idea of natural innocence is similarly integral to “Wedding-Wind” which combines these aspects with the ritual of marriage, immediately suggesting a perspective of greater deception: “The wind blew all my wedding-day, / And my wedding-night was the night of the high wind” (Larkin 45). The participation in ritual is still associated with self-negation as when the subject claims to be “Seeing my face in the twisted candlestick, / Yet seeing nothing” (Larkin 45) but the passage of greater interest occurs in the latter half of the poem, which takes place the following day:

Can it be borne, this bodying-forth by wind
Of joy my actions turn on, like a thread
Carrying beads? Shall I be let to sleep
Now this perpetual morning shares my bead?
Can even death dry up
These new delighted lakes, conclude
Our kneeling as cattle by all-generous waters? (Larkin 45)

Here, nature (as represented by the wind) is once again perceived in almost religious terms with the
beaded thread being suggestive of a rosary and the image of kneeling “by all-generous waters” which Swarbrick rightly points out as establishing a sense of “blessedness” and “essential unity” (44). Just as with “Coming” the subject of “Wedding-Wind” is given a sense of both innocence and naïveté, this time by, similarly to “Age”, identifying with the animal image of “cattle”, an obvious feature of greater deception.

The image of “cattle” recurs in one other place within The Less Deceived, in the poem “Wires” which thus invites juxtaposition against “Wedding-Wind”:

The widest prairies have electric fences,
For though old cattle know they must not stray
Young steers are always scenting purer water
Not here but anywhere. Beyond the wires

Leads them to blunder up against the wires
Whose muscle-shredding violence gives no quarter.
Young steers become old cattle from that day,
Electric limits to their widest senses. (Larkin 57)

The encirclement of even the “widest prairies” immediately serves to diminish and limit the previous grandeur of nature and this enclosure has been pointed out by Roger Craik as mirrored in the poem’s rhyme scheme of abcd dcba (401). The spiritual awe of “Wedding-Wind” is further negated by the scenting of purer water elsewhere, an act which somewhat dulls the previously exalted “all-generous waters” (Larkin 45). In dramatizing the young steers turning into old cattle “Wires” becomes an image of disillusion, the hallmark of lesser deception, and also reverses the motion of “Age” and “Wedding-Wind” which in both cases is toward innocence. It is telling that age is once again framed in terms of restraint and restriction but the flimsy “swaddling” of “Age” is replaced by the much harsher, “muscle-shredding”, wires. As in “Skin” (and unlike, for example, “Going”) this recognition of the transience of youth is not presented with any overt longing or nostalgia but is rather expressed in a comparatively neutral tone, marking it as a fact of life and placing it further towards lesser deception.

Returning to “Wedding-Wind” there is another passage of relevance where the eponymous wind causes a stable door to bang, prompting the speaker’s new husband to attend to the animals within:

[…] When he came back
He said the horses were restless, and I was sad
That any man or beast that night should lack
The happiness I had. (Larkin 45)

Swarbrick points out the slight ambivalence which this passage lends to the wind as a symbol of joy (44); I fully agree with such an analysis and would further claim that it provides the reference to an, in some ways, more profound negation of “Wedding-Wind” than was offered even by “Wires”. This can be found in “At Grass” which concerns the observation of two horses by an anonymous subject. In the first stanza it is said that the wind “distresses tail and mane” (Larkin 75), where the dual meaning of “distress”, introducing an emotional undertone beyond its immediate physical meaning, once again calls into question its previous status as a symbol of happiness. The more pertinent contrast, however, comes from the subsequent stanzas where it is made clear that these are former racehorses:

Yet fifteen years ago, perhaps
Two dozen distances sufficed
To fable them: faint afternoons
Of Cups and Stakes and Handicaps (Larkin 75)

The description of their former life is concluded with the lines: “The starting-gates, the crowd and cries – / All but the unmolesting meadows”. Craik rightly points out that the use of “unmolesting” implies that this former existence was of a “molesting” kind (410) which connects it to the aspect of violation present in “Deceptions” and implies its status as less deceived. The horses’ present situation is described in very different terms, however: “they // Have slipped their names, and stand at ease, / Or gallop for what must be joy” (Larkin 75). In this shedding of names is another act of self-dissolution and loss of identity of the kind present in “Coming”, “Absences” and “Age”, meaning that “At Grass” traces a movement from lesser to greater deception.

The current status of the horses as more deceived is itself subverted however by the closing lines of the poem: “Only the groom, and the groom’s boy, / With bridles in the evening come” (Larkin 75). Booth sees this final image as “mysteriously dignified” (121) and Tolley claims the mood as one of “serenity” and “tranquillity” (51). I would disagree, however, on both counts; the phrasing and the specification of “in the evening” lend something ominous to the event and the approaching bridles can be seen as restraining implements, controlling and limiting the expressions of nature similarly to the wires of “Wires”. By placing these implements in the hands of someone described
by the duplicitous word “groom” the poem establishes a yet stronger reference to “Wedding-Wind”, where a (bride)groom was similarly attending to the horses.

Thus the horses are once again among the less deceived and the innocence of “Wedding-Wind” is given an almost sinister undertone in that its naïve happiness is implicated in somehow allowing or causing the corruption or shattering of the innocence of others by restraining their natural freedom. It is also worth noting that the horses have much stronger claim to the animal innocence and simplicity which the subject of “Wedding-Wind” only embodies by analogy. The suggestion that there can be a causal link between the greater deception of the subject and the lesser deception of the horses brings the poem into contact with “Deceptions” where the self-deception and naïveté of the rapist lead to the disillusion and violation of his victim. The pairing of “Wedding-Wind” and “At Grass” thus reinforces the ethical dimension of the overarching contrast and further complicates the claims to carefree innocence associated with the more deceived viewpoint.

Considerations of responsibility are also relevant to “Myxomatosis” which gets its title from a rabbit disease\(^4\) and is thus implied as being addressed to a rabbit:

Caught in the centre of a soundless field  
While hot inexplicable hours go by  
*What trap is this? Where were its teeth concealed?*  
You seem to ask.  

I make a sharp reply,  
Then clean my stick. I’m glad I can’t explain  
Just in what jaws you were to suppurate:  
You may have thought things would come right again  
If you could only keep quite still and wait. (Larkin 61; original emphasis)

The treatment of the animal is here very different from “Wedding-Wind”. There is no identification of the subject and the animal; they are instead separated rather forcefully by the abrupt line-break just before the poem’s first reference to an “I”. This line break, along with the word “sharp” also serves to emphasize the violence of the act which is only hinted at by the subsequent cleaning of a stick. The context provided by the title suggests that this act is, at least in some sense, one of mercy but the speaker still seems to assume an attitude of responsibility and even guilt or shame as noted by Craik (402). The statement “I’m glad I can’t explain” is in some ways similar to the realization

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\(^4\) The disease is highly fatal and especially noteworthy for having been deliberately introduced to Europe and Australia as a form of pest control (“Myxomatosis”).
from “Deception” that “I would not dare / Console you if I could” (Larkin 67). The two speakers are brought together in their sense of responsibility for acts that neither is directly responsible for causing.

Thus it once again becomes apparent that lesser deception, while often implying disillusion and powerlessness, does not have to result in the world-weary distaste of “Wants” nor the sinister cynicism of “If, My darling” but can also encompass a certain degree of empathy. This contrasts with the aforementioned ethical concerns associated with greater deception and could perhaps be taken as a moralistic elevation of the less deceived position but is not necessarily so. While there is, in both “Deceptions” and “Myxomatosis”, a clear recognition of responsibility and guilt, it does nothing to avert or alleviate the corruption of innocence which takes place in both poems. In this sense it is arguably better to maintain the blissful ignorance of “Wedding-Wind” rather than simply upholding an impotent guilt in the face of unchangeable circumstances. Thus the state of lesser deception once again comes to be associated with futility and despair, making its seeming moral insights of questionable value.

In conclusion, it is clear that the ideas of lesser and greater deception can indeed be said to inform The Less Deceived to a significant extent and that paying closer attention to thematic interrelations of individual poems can bring out many different nuances of meaning. By the application of this contrastive method it becomes apparent that, while undeniably connected in various ways, the poems of the collection are not easily subsumed under a single underlying principle or intention but are rather, in the words of “If, My Darling”, “double-yolked with meaning and meaning’s rebuttal” (Larkin 72). This contrastive nature is also made apparent to the reader through a series of opposing terms which, to varying degrees, inform the viewpoints expressed in the different poems. Thus the more deceived tends to be associated with illusion, distance, surface, artifice and innocence while the less deceived subsumes the opposites of disillusion, proximity, depth, reality and guilt; both also invite ethical consideration. This breadth of categories and the granularity of their expression mean that there is no single metric according to which the different outlooks presented can be measured, meaning that the overarching contrast of The Less Deceived resists reduction to a simple hierarchical order. This speaks to a recognition of the inherently complex and multifaceted nature of human existence and experience. Such complexity is easily lost, however, if the collection is only read as part of a larger body of work or as an expression of a single authorial attention, rather than being approached on its own terms.
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