Explore the work of ONE or TWO writers which address a sense of dislocation from the past in either the characters, or poems' speakers, or the audience/readers, and consider the ways in which they go about this.

I will examine the ways in which both Philip Larkin and T.S. Eliot address a sense of dislocation from the past in their poems. In their work, both Larkin and Eliot demonstrate how dislocation from the past can become expressed by a loss of identity, and how a life deprived of the narrative of chronological memories can trap a person between an inexpressible past and a futile future.

Larkin felt dislocated from the past because of what he saw as the absurdity of the way in which things were done differently there. In "This Be The Verse", Larkin sees his forebears as "fools in old-style hats and coats / Who half the time were soppy-stern / And half at one another's throats". The absurdity of his grandparent's time is accentuated in Larkin's eyes by their mode of dress and by their hypocrisy. It is their confused values, the "soppy-stern", which Larkin ascribes to having passed on misery to his own parents; and it is the faults which he sees himself to have inherited from his parents which he rejects outright. Larkin deliberately distances himself from a past he finds objectionable using the unorthodox language of youth, "They fuck you up, your

mum and dad". This is a past even to be feared by Larkin, by the part he could play in its continuation: "Man hands on misery to man".

Living through a time when the traditional assumptions of a strong family were being disconcertingly undermined, Larkin contributed his contempt for a certain kind of marriage in the poem "Self's the Man":

O, no one can deny
That Arnold is less selfish than I.
He married a woman to stop her getting away
Now she's there all day.

With its sardonic sarcasm and its depiction of a man trapped in unhappy wedlock, Larkin describes a situation dislocated from an idealised past.

Larkin attacks another traditional institution in present decay in "Church Going". Larkin conjectures that "superstition, like belief, must die" and wonders "what we shall turn them into", when "churches fall completely out of use". To Larkin, the Church is a symbol of former strength in foreign times. In "Aubade", Larkin describes religion as "that vast moth-eaten musical brocade / Created to pretend we never die". Religion, family and marriage, are institutions which Larkin relegates to the past and in which Larkin feels he has no place.

In the process of growing up, we must learn a degree of contentment with the state of the world we are brought up in, in order to become well adjusted to it. In

rejecting the values of his parents, and in recognising the "misery" which they passed on to him, Larkin embraced cynicism, and became grouped under the critical umbrella of the "Angry Young Men". Whilst rarely as angrily high-key as this label suggests, many of his poems seem to form part of a bitter crusade against the cosseted world-view. In "The Old Fools", Larkin rejects the myth of a happy old age, the peaceful conclusion to a fulfilled life. Larkin depicts an anguished old age of failing faculties, the degrading humiliation of gradual incapacity, which leads him to ask, "If they don't (and they can't), it's strange: / Why aren't they screaming?". Larkin defies any rose-tinted view of the human condition, and in doing so rejects a tradition in which all cynicism is considered unhealthy.

In relentlessly undermining the established, traditional values he sees around him, Larkin loses that sense of an unquestioning narrative in his life: that life narrative which coheres the past, locates the present and gives the semblance of order, purpose and meaning. In "Forget What Did", Larkin describes how "Stopping the diary / Was a stun to memory". In effect, dismissing as insignificant his life narrative, he finds that should the "empty pages" ever be filled, it should be with "Celestial recurrences, / The day the flowers come, / And when the birds go". Larkin seeks to forget the banality of his existence, saying of the words: "I wanted them over, / Hurried to burial".

This dislocation from the past expresses itself in the futility of tomorrow. Caught between two desolate vanishing points Larkin lives out the perpetual present in an uncaring world too keenly aware of the foreboding of his mortality. In "Aubade", the speaker describes how "I work all day, and get half-drunk at night", expressing an incomprehensible yet inevitable routine. Thus "Waking at four to soundless dark", Larkin is confronted with a seemingly existentialist universe "the uncaring, / Intricate rented world", in which the only certainty is death. The sole driving force seems to be an end in itself, the dictum: "Work has to be done". Yet as Larkin waits for the world "to rouse", the poem seems to underline that what he is waiting for is death: "Unresting death, a whole day nearer now". Larkin's narrative-less, and thus dislocated, past robs him of a meaningful future.

So it is then, that at four o'clock in the morning, Larkin finds himself in the same deserted street as Eliot did before him. In "Rhapsody on a Windy Night", Eliot considers the advice: "sleep, prepare for life" and recognises it only as "The last twist of the knife". As Larkin experienced, so Eliot is deprived of a meaningful tomorrow by his loss of a sense of the past. His memory loses coherence:

Whispering lunar incantations

Dissolve the floors of memory

And all its clear relations,

Its divisions and precisions.

So to Eliot the past becomes a series of seemingly unrelated images, "a crowd of twisted things": "An old crab with barnacles on his back", "sunless dry geraniums", "Smells of chestnuts". The passing of time is remarked by a talking street-lamp. Thus the past is presented as a bewildering dream-world whose relationship to present reality is uncertain. We may interpret that Eliot has no insulating continuity of experience within which context he can shelter and define himself aside from the confusion of images of his daily life. To "sleep" and to "prepare for life" preludes the torment of another day.

Larkin feels dislocated from the past because he sees in received interpretations of the past, a sentimentality which he cannot agree with. In "An Arundel Tomb", upon seeing the earl and countess sculpted as holding hands upon their tomb, Larkin considers the interpretation that this demonstrates their love for each other as a deluded misinterpretation. He comments upon how they "*lie* in stone" (my emphasis) and how this throw-away gesture was merely "A sculptor's sweet commissioned grace / Thrown off" as a "stone fidelity / They hardly meant". Larkin points to the dislocation of understanding which will open, when we try to apply our values to the past. Thus the "endless altered

people" who visit the tomb on a tourists' pilgrimage are "washing at their identity" and are evidence of how time transfigures the past "into / Untruth".

In contrast, in "Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album", Larkin welcomes the honesty of photography: "that records / Dull days as dull, and hold-it smiles as frauds". Yet the photographs agonisingly tantalise him by at once presenting "such nutritious images" of the past at which his "swivel eye hungers from pose to pose"; yet simultaneously reminding him of the untouchability of that which is so real to him. The pain of dislocation from this past is clear, as Larkin describes how "we yowl across / The gap from eye to page". These photographs, which act as windows upon the past, also imprison the past within an immutable moment, from the "eye" or "I" of the consciously distanced Larkin.

Eliot also demonstrates a dislike of sentimentality of the old looking upon the young. Eliot rejects the idea that experience allows condescension of youth and thus in "Portrait of a Lady" smiles at those who would smile upon youth:

'Ah, my friend, you do not know, you do not know
What life is ...
And youth ...
... smiles at situations which it cannot see.'
I smile, of course,

And go on drinking tea.

Eliot feels dislocated from the excluding past which the "Lady" represents.

In Eliot's "The Waste Land", we are overwhelmed by fragmented history. Emit observes how the quintessentially Modernist poem defines a new language for itself by forcing us to find links between the recycled imagery of various literary texts (Emig, Chapter 3, essay 5: "Absence as Structure: The Wasteland", *Modernism in Poetry*, pp 73-87). I would add that in "The Wasteland", Eliot has written a poem which at once dislocates itself from all language and all literary movements which have gone before it, and paradoxically immerses itself in the past of literary history. This history seems to form a distorted sea composed of a diverse assimilation of literary texts. This metaphor is expressed again, Emig suggests, in "The Dry Salvages" the third of the "Four Quartets", in which history is depicted as a sea into which the pouring of one man's life as "the river" (line 1: the Mississippi), passes unremarked and is ultimately indistinguishable in its effect. (Rainer Emig, *Modernism in Poetry*, (USA, Longman Publishing, 1995), p84). In this sense, an individual's past is lost, never to be retrieved, indiscernibly assimilated into the confused mélange of history. In "The Wasteland", we are confronted with an overwhelming vision of history as a panoply of chronologically disparate voices, with each of the literary references trailing subtexts of polyphonous symbolic weight. An

example of this can be sought in Eliot's own notes upon Tiresias, quoted here from the Norton Anthology, p1242:

Tiresias, although a mere spectator and not indeed a 'character', is yet the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest. Just as the one-eyed merchant, seller of currants, melts into the Phoenician sailor, and the latter is not wholly distinct from Ferdinand Prince of Naples, so all the women are one woman, and the two sexes meet in Tiresias.

This representation of history as a collage of seemingly tenuously related images and symbols yoked together with bewildering eclecticism, seems analogous to history in our memories. It mirrors the onrush of a web of memories linked beyond the rationality of the conscious mind and triggered by a single image, a disorientating sea of remembrances which require effort to organise into a chronological order. The nature of human memory dislocates us from the past. "The Wasteland" seems to confound the imposition of a narrative structure upon it, indeed the tone is almost defiant, with which Eliot writes in lines 301 to 302, "'I can connect / Nothing with nothing'". Equally however, these lines could be interpreted in the tones of exasperation of one for whom the past is too dislocated to link with.

In "The Old Fools", this same dislocation by memory is experienced even more acutely, by Larkin - in the senility of the elderly he describes. He imagines

being old "is having lighted rooms / Inside your head" inhabited by "People you know, yet can't quite name". The past is evoked only in ill-understood images and half-memories, of these people "smiling from a stair", "extracting / A known book from the shelves", or the "sun's / Faint friendliness on the wall some lonely / Rain-ceased midsummer evening." Again, in "Forget What Did", Larkin describes memory acting as a barrier, or smoke-screen, between him and the past:

Like the wars and winters
Missing behind the windows
Of an opaque childhood.

As we are failed by our memories in trying to place ourselves in the past, so both Larkin and Eliot demonstrate how we are failed by language in our attempts to place ourselves in the past. As part of an attempt to define ourselves and to realise an identity for ourselves in the present, understanding and being able to describe the events of the past is crucially important; if one assumes that our personality and attitudes are profoundly affected by our personal histories. In Eliot's poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", we see that Prufrock finds himself incapable of expression, unable "To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways" (line 60). These are days which seem to Prufrock to be without event, devoid of anecdote, or which even if he were to relate, days

whose solemn nuances of mood he could not convey. Prufrock's fear is that if he should "dare" to reveal his story he should perhaps be snubbed by the ubiquitous yet aloof presence of the woman, who could reject his narrative and his attempt to harness language, saying: "That is not what I meant at all. / That is not it, at all" (lines 97 and 98). This inability to confirm and legitimise his existence through language, "It is impossible to say just what I mean!" (line 104), leaves Prufrock's sense of identity fragile, as it prevents him from locating himself in the past.

Prufrock's inability to vocalise his past also allows others to impinge upon his identity casting him further from an affirmation of his life narrative. Prufrock talks of, "The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase, / And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin". Prufrock feels trapped by the identity which precise mastery of language allows the women to define for him. The women in the poem can describe Prufrock's life in words, whereas what Prufrock appears to be responding to in his past, is perhaps more subtle, perhaps simply banal, but nonetheless entombed in images:

Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets
And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes
Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows? ...
(lines 70 to 72)

It is perhaps that Prufrock is embarrassed by his past, a series of mundane non-events, which, even if he were capable of describing, he would shrink from recounting. In the same way, we have noted how in "Forget What Did" Larkin feels that his past is not worthy of note, and stops setting the past down in words in his diary. We can now observe that this has the effect of making Larkin lose his sense of self, how in discontinuing the enunciation through language of his life narrative, Larkin becomes dislocated from his past and thus his identity. The "I" of the title is missing.

In contrast, whereas in the poem "MCMXIV" one might expect Larkin to be embarrassed by the blissfully ignorant naïvety of 1914, instead he seems to delight in its "innocence" and almost longs nostalgically for the vision he creates, remarking, "Never such innocence again" (line 32). Yet his vision of 1914 is indeed a nostalgic one, rose-tinted and dream-like in its evocation of "The place-names all hazed over / With flowering grasses", "children at play", "moustached archaic faces / Grinning", "And the countryside not caring". Larkin's vision does not include the church, the confinement of marriage, and the strength of family bonds which provided the structural support for this scenic façade. There is the strong emphasis that this time is exclusive and forever out of our grasp, "Never before or since", yet for the first time Larkin seems truly to identify with, cherish and have pride in, an aspect of the past. It

seems churlish to point out that Larkin has avoided dislocation from 1914 only by sentimentalising it.

When deprived of words with which to express the past, both Larkin and Eliot see their pasts increasingly defined by objects. Thus in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", Prufrock identifies with an urbane household object to describe the monotonous routine of his life: "I have measured out my life with coffee spoons" (line 51). In "Home is so Sad", Larkin describes how an empty house evokes its last occupants. He can see how the home was "A joyous shot at how things ought to be, / Long fallen wide" and finds himself understanding this past through the narrative language of objects: "The music in the piano stool. That vase".

To conclude, both Larkin and Eliot attack the comfort of assumption; and they both do this by dislocating themselves from the past. Eliot rejects, at his Modernist apotheosis in "The Wasteland", the traditional assumptions of a speaker/reader relationship, by negating the existence of any reader not extremely well versed in often obscure literary texts. Eliot rejects all notions of a conventional narrative structure. Eliot also (Emig, *Modernism in Poetry*, pp 73-87) rejects linguistic tradition by seeking to create a hermetic literary echolalia using a "collage of metonymies".

Larkin, as an Angry Young Man in the cast of Jimmy Porter, albeit subdued by melancholy, seems to revel in his own bitterness and cynicism. He rails against the traditional, comfortable assumptions with which he perceives we delude ourselves into happiness: marriage, true love, happy old age, strong families and religion. Larkin seeks to disillusion us from the comfortable assumptions of the past.

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