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# 1

## Larkin and Modernism: Jazz<sup>1</sup>

### I The modernity of jazz

In the riotous introduction to *All What Jazz*, Larkin argued that in the mid-century period, with the generations of Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis and John Coltrane, jazz lost (or wilfully squandered) its high communicability, becoming as obscure, experimental and culturally elitist as the poetry of Ezra Pound or the painting of Pablo Picasso. Having made this alliterative triangulation between Parker, Pound and Picasso, he then breaks over the heads of all three an oceanic tirade against Modernism:

I dislike such things not because they are new, but because they are irresponsible exploitations of technique in contradiction of human life as we know it. This is my essential criticism of modernism, whether perpetrated by Parker, Pound or Picasso: it helps us neither to enjoy nor endure. It will divert us as long as we are prepared to be mystified or outraged, but maintains its hold only by being more mystifying and more outrageous: it has no lasting power. Hence the compulsion of every modernist to wade deeper and deeper into violence and obscenity ...

(*AWJ*, 17)

One can hardly be more categorical than that: Larkin hates Modernism; jazz becomes Modernist in the 1940s; therefore the history of jazz fits a lapsarian model being divisible into pre-Parker (good) and post-Parker (bad) eras.

Alarminglly, even when they disagree with his view that it represents a qualitative decline, most commentators tacitly accept Larkin's assumptions

that jazz becomes Modernist with Charlie Parker.<sup>2</sup> The truth, of course, is quite otherwise, and such as to destabilize Larkin's cod absolutes. For if Modernism is characterized by radical stylistic innovation, then jazz was from its inception Modernist music *par excellence* – and was recognized as such at the time. As early as 1922, F. Scott Fitzgerald designated the 1920s, the high point of Modernism, as 'the jazz age'. The poets of the day sought to incorporate staccato rhythms, blues idioms or descriptions of jazz records and gramophones as earnest of their modernity: think of Eliot in *The Waste Land* ('O O O O that Shakespeherian Rag'); Joseph Moncure March in *The Wild Party* ('the melody began to float / From a saxophone's low-pitched, husky throat'); Langston Hughes in 'The Weary Blues'; E.E. Cummings's syncopated lyrics; or William Carlos Williams's inclusion in *Paterson* of a chunk of the jazz clarinetist Mezz Mezzrow's autobiography, *Really the Blues* – forerunners, all of them, of 'For Sidney Bechet' ('Oh, play that thing!') and 'Reference Back' ('Oliver's *Riverside Blues*, it was').

The great Modernist composers in the classical tradition also recognized the peculiar contemporaneity of jazz and swiftly moved to assimilate certain of its features. One thinks of the Stravinsky of *The Soldier's Tale*, *Ragtime for Eleven Instruments* and *Piano-Rag Music*, all composed scarcely a year after that momentous day, 26 February 1917, when the Original Dixieland Jass Band went into the Victor Studios in New York City and made the very first jazz record. One might also mention the Kurt Weill of *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*; George Antheil's *Jazz Symphony*; the Shostakovitch of the *Jazz Suites* and of *Tahiti Trot*; Darius Milhaud's 'ballet nègre' *The Creation of the World*; and the Ravel of the *Piano Concerto in G* and the *Violin Sonata* (the slow movement of which is called, simply, *Blues*). Béla Bartók, Aaron Copland, Morton Gould, Alex North and Paul Hindemith all wrote extended compositions for Benny Goodman; Igor Stravinsky and Leonard Bernstein did the same for Goodman's fellow jazz clarinetist Woody Herman; while Arnold Schoenberg nominated George Gershwin the greatest composer of the century for his ability to amalgamate classical, showbiz and jazz components in works like *Rhapsody in Blue* and *Porgy and Bess*. And this is to ignore jazz musicians like Duke Ellington, who were crossing the line from the other side, expanding jazz's horizons to almost symphonic proportions.<sup>3</sup>

The modernity of jazz lay only in part with its formal innovations – its emphasis on improvisation, its complex and insistent percussiveness, the use of the so-called blue notes, its occasional syncopation and, above all, its conception of performance as creative rather than merely

interpretative. Though, indeed, no Modernist art has shown less respect for the received truths about itself than has jazz, topping up its modernity by undergoing (in Larkin's words) 'a radical upheaval every twenty years' (*LJ*, 75). For deeper than this is the way in which the black American experience is central to and constitutive of modernity because of its catastrophic exposure to enforced diaspora, genocide, exile, alienation, cultural mutation and hybridity, and fractured or doubled selfhood. The sheer scale and iniquity of the slave experience marked out blacks as the first truly modern people by obliging them to confront in the eighteenth century horrors which only became the substance of everyday life in Europe in the era of Stalin and Hitler. Elements of this argument were propounded decades ago by W.E.B. DuBois in *Black Reconstruction* and C.L.R. James in *The Black Jacobins*, but have been taken up and amplified by such contemporary cultural historians as Paul Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993).

Some of these critics – most notably Ann Douglas in *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (1994) and Francis Davis in *The History of the Blues* (1995) – have stressed the fact that jazz itself was the product of the cultural hybridity that resulted from the slaves' exposure to a wealth of musical influences in the United States. On different occasions, Larkin himself described jazz as 'this musical border-country between Africa and the New World' (*AWJ*, 25) and a 'multi-racial, Afro-European musical stew' (*LJ*, 37). Trying to account for the universal appeal of jazz, he suggested that it had 'something to do with the hybrid nature of the music, no doubt, the union of Europe and Africa, the waltzes and hymns' (*LJ*, 140–1). One such influence derived from religious conversion, the enforced Christianization of slaves having the unlooked-for effect of the Africanization of the hymn book in an uprush of creativity that eventually gave rise to the Spiritual, Gospel and Soul. Other influences included plantation work songs; Irish folk music; Western orchestral instrumentation and the band line-up; the legacy of minstrelsy, coon shows and vaudeville; and the Jewish-American input of New York's Tin Pan Alley.<sup>4</sup> There was even a distinct contribution from musicians of Native American ancestry, such as the trombonist Kid Ory; saxophonist Frankie Trumbauer; trumpeters Bubber Miley and Art Farmer; guitarist Jim Hall; and pianists Duke Ellington, John Lewis, Dave Brubeck and Horace Silver (every one of whom is praised in *All What Jazz*). Hence, jazz is at once the historical repository of the black experience in the United States and an art form characterized by its cosmopolitanism, pluralism and mutability. Not so

much jungle music as mongrel music. Not so much roots music as routes music. Which is also to say that the really distinguished thing about jazz is that here was a rare example of popular Modernism, Modernism with street credibility, Modernism rising from the bottom up not percolating down from a cultural elite.

Larkin responded to all of this wholeheartedly and in full consciousness of the socio-political implications of the dispossessed being the creators of ‘the unique emotional language of our century’ (*LJ*, 40):

It is ironical that the first American music to catch world attention should have originated among the nation’s most despised section – the Negroes, who well within living memory had been regarded as a species of farm animal (‘nobody killed, just a mule and a couple of niggers’). It must have been galling for Europe-orientated concert-goers of Boston and Philadelphia when Dvorak proclaimed ‘in the Negro melodies of America I discover all that is needed for a great and noble school of music’; when Ravel insisted on going to The Nest in Chicago to hear Jimmy Noone; when Milhaud and Honegger used jazz rhythms as if they took them seriously. For this jazz was not only a hideous cacophony played on old tins and saxophones, it was the very language of the brothels and speakeasies where it was played, and constituted a direct incitement to immorality, so menacing the entire fabric of society.

(*LJ*, 57)

The last point is worth emphasizing: jazz was intimately connected with the sex industry – the word itself (like ‘rock ‘n’ roll’ later) means sexual intercourse or orgasm, and many key practitioners had been pimps (Jelly Roll Morton), prostitutes (Billie Holiday) and bordello entertainers (the titular venue of Louis Armstrong’s ‘Mahogany Hall stomp’ was an up-market New Orleans brothel). The innuendo of George Formby’s ‘With my little stick of Blackpool rock’ was as nothing compared with the culinary metaphors jazz employed to escape the blue pencil: ‘Does anybody here want to try my cabbage?’, ‘Nobody in town can bake a sweet Jelly Roll like mine’, ‘Who’s gonna chop your suey when I’m gone?’ and ‘Another man’s been cookin’ in my lady’s pan’. Jazz was at the forefront of a sexual as well as a musical revolution: John Reith, first director general of the BBC, recognized as much in praising the Nazis for banning it, his only regret being that ‘we should be behind in dealing with this filthy product of modernity’.<sup>5</sup>

Whatever his claims to the contrary, then, Larkin's real critique of the Parker generation is not that it renders jazz threateningly Modernistic, but that it renders the jazz which had always been Modernistic less accessible, converting it into a minority cult and relinquishing the mass audience to the genuine but rhythmically less sophisticated pleasures of rock 'n' roll (he was an admirer of Bob Dylan and the Beatles):

It doesn't take much imagination to see that this is where the jazz impulse, the jazz following, has migrated. This is where the jazz public has gone, and even where jazz has gone, for this music, rock and roll, rhythm and blues, or just plain beat, is for all its tedious vulgarity nearer jazz than the rebarbative astringencies of Coleman, Coltrane and the late Eric Dolphy.

(*LJ*, 142)

'Jazz is a popular art no longer' (*LJ*, 140), Larkin moaned, for the Western world that formerly boogied to Benny Goodman, Count Basie and Artie Shaw now jived to Elvis, Little Richard or the Rolling Stones. The likes of Archie Shepp and Ornette Coleman had managed the seemingly impossible: they had produced a form of jazz that could not be danced to.

Whatever its rights and wrongs, this position is radically different from and more plausible than the one Larkin pretends to adopt. So why does he do it? Because his love of jazz directly contradicts his anti-Modernist stance, shifting one of his already decideds towards undecidability; by pretending that jazz only became Modernist in the 1940s he is able, at a cosmetic level, to square his love of the former with his supposed loathing of the latter. Larkin loved many aspects of Modernist music but lied about it, and when we move to Modernist poetry we find that once again he was attracted to the liberating heresy of that which he publicly excoriated.

## II 'For Sidney Bechet' and Modernist aesthetics

One way we might consolidate this claim is by looking at 'For Sidney Bechet', Larkin's most direct address in verse to the subject of jazz, and a poem one of whose principal themes is the endorsement of Modernist aesthetics. This last may seem a perverse interpretation when so many of Larkin's reviews and interviews positively relish the assertion of Realist dogmas. What Realist dogmas? That art should be representational, objectively copying what the eye sees ('Poetry is an affair of sanity, of seeing things as they are.' *RW*, 197). That the concept of authorial intentionality

is valid, readers' interpretations deviating from those of the author being wrong ('Interviewer: *But what if a critic construes a poem in a way you felt you didn't mean?* Larkin: I should think he was talking balls.' *FR*, 50). That modern critical theory is misguided in its preoccupation with the multiplicity of a text's meanings and the relativity of the readerly responses elicited (hence Larkin's sarcasm about the desire of 'twentieth-century criticism ... to demonstrate that what looks simple is in fact complicated, that what seems to have one meaning has in fact three or four'. *RW*, 247). That art should not only tell the truth, but should do so in a style so lucid as to obviate critical explication ('I may flatter myself, but I think ... there's not much to say about my work. When you've read a poem, that's it, it's all quite clear what it means.' *RW*, 53–4). That one of the virtues of this transparency of style is that it makes no demands upon the reader. Larkin ended his essay on 'The Pleasure Principle' – a title appropriated from Freud – by endorsing the sentiments of Samuel Butler: 'I should like to like Schumann's music better than I do; I dare say I could make myself like it better if I tried; but I do not like having to try to make myself like things; I like things that make me like them at once and no trying at all' (*RW*, 82). That radical stylistic experimentation ('irresponsible exploitations of technique in contradiction of human life as we know it', *AWJ*, 17) is therefore to be condemned, especially when it involves alluding to other art works instead of conveying experience direct ('Poems don't come from other poems, they come from being oneself in life', *FR*, 54). That this depiction of the indisputably true in a language of utter transparency elicits immediate assent from the reader because if he or she had the requisite skill they would have described the experience in exactly the same way. Hence Larkin's comment on 'The Whitsun Weddings': 'It was just the transcription of a very happy afternoon. I didn't change a thing. ... It only needed writing down. Anybody could have done it' (*FR*, 57).

Each of these points, so passionately advocated in Larkin's prose, is directly contradicted by 'For Sidney Bechet', which discusses and approves an alternative Modernist agenda. It is a cardinal principle of Modernism that the reality of the artwork takes precedence over any reality depicted in it. So much so, indeed, that Modernism is in part characterized by a long infatuation, sometimes consummated, with complete abstraction. One small symptom of this in literature, the most referential of the arts, was the adoption of musical titles in deference to the most abstract of art forms. The most famous example is that of Eliot, with such poems as the 'Preludes', 'Rhapsody on a Windy Night', 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' and *Four Quartets*. Larkin's poem affiliates itself to this Modernist tradition to the extent that it is based not directly upon life, as the Realist

credo demands, but upon a prior art form, the most abstract of the arts (music), and the most experimental of modes within that art (jazz).

This acknowledgement of the autonomy of art is accompanied by its corollary, that the concept of intentionality is a chimera, the author no longer being treated as the source and arbiter of meaning. This is affirmed at two levels: the poem resolutely declines to conflate its narrator with Larkin, disclosing little or nothing about the age, race, gender, marital status, sexual orientation or religion of its narrator; and just as the author is erased (or at least decentred) from his poem, so Bechet's music is described from a number of perspectives, none of them biographical. This approach is congruent with Eliot's notion of the impersonality of the artist and with the words of Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: 'The artist, like the God of creation, remains within or behind or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his nails'.

Once the meaning of an artefact is no longer regarded as having been nailed to the floor of the author's intentions, a limited plurality of interpretations is generated relative to different reading perspectives; for, as Eliot averred, 'to understand anything is to understand from a point of view'.<sup>6</sup> This is precisely the aesthetic theory dramatized in 'For Sidney Bechet'. The poem opens by comparing Bechet's famous vibrato to the rippling of New Orleans reflected in the waters of the Mississippi river:

That note you hold, narrowing and rising, shakes  
Like New Orleans reflected on the water ...  
(CP, 88)

The simile is decidedly strained, even factitious, and serves from the very start to alert us to the fact that what we are discussing is the *image* (inverted, inconstant, written on water) of New Orleans and not the place itself. The next line extends this idea by suggesting that jazz – like the other arts – belongs to the realm of imagination rather than fact, and that therefore the sensations it gives rise to, however apposite or profound, are in a sense fictitious or false:

That note you hold, narrowing and rising, shakes  
Like New Orleans reflected on the water,  
And in all ears appropriate falsehood wakes ...

At one level the meaning of that phrase 'appropriate falsehood' might be thought to accord with Picasso's view that art is a lie that helps one



see the truth more clearly. At another level something more precise may be inferred, as in this gloss from *All What Jazz*:

Every age has its romantic city and ours is New Orleans. ... In its way, it was a kind of Cockaigne: parades, picnics, funerals, all had their brass bands, and every citizen, shoeblack, cigarmaker, bricklayer, was half a musician. Their music has become synonymous with a particularly buoyant kind of jazz that seems to grow from a spontaneous enjoyment of living.

(*AWJ*, 45)

Cockaigne was the utopian country of medieval poetry and of a famous painting by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, an abode of luxury, idleness and gluttony. The fabulatory nature of the reference is confirmed when Larkin adds that the joyousness of New Orleans jazz was ever a triumph of optimism over experience, the actuality of the place, certainly for its black residents, being 'an appallingly vicious squalor' (*AWJ*, 45). Bechet's music may especially be considered a source of 'appropriate falsehood' in that, although he was one of the two greatest exponents of the New Orleans sound (the other being Louis Armstrong), he left the city in 1919, scarcely out of his teens, and apart from two fleeting visits in 1944 he never went back. At the time of Larkin's birth, Bechet was resident in England, and by the time of the poem's composition he was a citizen of France. The New Orleans of his recordings was at best a distant memory, irradiated perhaps by the golden glow of nostalgia, and may actually have been no more than a particular way of doing music that required no anchorage in the original topography.

The conviction that we have moved beyond the reflective metaphor of the first two lines of the poem (art as a mirror held up to nature) towards a constructivist theory of art is confirmed by the first word of the fourth line, 'Building', with its suggestion that jazz has invented New Orleans rather than the other way round. This key word simultaneously pivots the argument towards reader reception, the rest of the poem enumerating (with no suggestion that the list is exhaustive) four 'appropriate falsehoods', four different versions or facets of New Orleans conjured up by Bechet's performance. The first of these is the historic French quarter of the city, subsequently a major tourist attraction, not least for its jazz museum:

And in all ears appropriate falsehood wakes,  
Building for some a legendary Quarter

Of balconies, flower-baskets and quadrilles,  
Everyone making love and going shares –  
Oh, play that thing!

The second is Storyville, a particular segment of the French quarter that constituted the red light district and whose partial closure in 1917 (one of the reasons the district is now 'mute') contributed to the diaspora of New Orleans jazz players like Bechet:

Mute glorious Storyvilles  
Others may license, grouping round their chairs  
Sporting-house girls ...

A third response is the archival one of a certain sort of jazz fanatic who gets all wrapped up, as though in a travel-rug or plaid (these days the simile would be that of an anorak), with the precise membership of particular bands:

... scholars *manqués* nod around unnoticed  
Wrapped up in personnels like old plaids.

As it happens, personnels *were* fluid in New Orleans bands of all sizes, not least because club managers might reduce their costs by the temporary laying-off of members on nights when the paying audience was small. When it came to recordings the problem was yet more complex, even major artists like Bechet feeling it necessary to break contract and supplement their meagre earnings by participating in studio sessions anonymously or pseudonymously. Plenty of material here for what Larkin disparagingly referred to as 'discographical train-spotters' (*LJ*, 55).

The fourth and final response, that of the narrator, is the most emotional of them all and seems the more so coming immediately after the rather fusty antiquarian approach:

On me your voice falls as they say love should,  
Like an enormous yes. My Crescent City  
Is where your speech alone is understood,  
And greeted as the natural noise of good,  
Scattering long-haired grief and scored pity.

Here Bechet's sound seems almost God-like, his 'voice' falling from above, like manna from heaven, the epitome of 'love', of yea-saying and

of 'good'; in other words, the very antithesis of another American voice from above, that of the bogus Evangelist in 'Faith Healing', the poem immediately preceding 'For Sidney Bechet' in *The Whitsun Weddings*. It is also worth underlining the fact that this benign, almost sacramental interpretation of Bechet necessitates an Eliotic acceptance that 'the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates', for in art the only 'significant emotion' is that 'which has its life in the poem and not in the history of the poet'.<sup>7</sup> Bechet, of whose 'fits of temperament' Larkin was indulgently aware (*LJ*, 45), was first imprisoned and then deported from Britain for assaulting a London prostitute, and was later imprisoned and then deported from France for starting a gun fight in which three innocent people, one man and two women, were seriously wounded. As drummer Zutty Singleton said: 'He was a hell of a cat. He could be mean. He could be sweet. He could be in between.'<sup>8</sup> Would that some of Larkin's commentators could keep in mind the distinction between the art and the artist of 'For Sidney Bechet', which takes it as axiomatic that a man may be a bit of a devil but still play the sax like an angel.

Thus far we have seen how our poem uses jazz to underline the autonomy of art, to emphasize that art is constitutive rather than merely reflective of reality, to discredit author-centred interpretations, and to demonstrate the multiplicity of meanings to which even music of two or three minutes' duration gives rise relative to the viewpoints of different audiences. Many of these values are entrenched on the plane of the poem itself. Thus, not only does 'For Sidney Bechet' attribute to jazz a multiplicity and relativity of meaning, but it too is open to a variety of sometimes mutually exclusive interpretations.

One small, teasing example is that of the polysemic wordplay contained in the phrase 'Mute glorious Storyvilles'. The line invokes 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard' by Thomas Gray, which was composed two hundred years earlier and which speculates of the eponymous burial ground, 'Some mute inglorious Milton here may rest'. Gray's words in turn derive from the following passage of the *Aeneid* (Book XII, lines 395–7):

... ille ut depositi proferret fata parentis,  
scire potestates herbarum usumque medendi  
maluit et mutas agitare inglorius artis.

In contravention of Larkin's professed Realism ('Poems don't come from other poems ...'), we already have art (Larkin's poem) about art

(Bechet's jazz) about art (Gray's 'Elegy') about art (the poet John Milton) about art (Virgil's *Aeneid*). This palimpsestic multi-layering is later supplemented by invocations of the end of James Joyce's *Ulysses* in the phrase 'an enormous yes' and of the *Book of Proverbs* (xxxii, 10) in the words 'priced/Far above rubies'. Equally dizzying are the puns. We have already remarked that 'mute', as well as helping to recall Thomas Gray, may be taken to refer to the silencing of Storyville in 1917. More obviously, it is an attachment, much favoured by jazz musicians, used to soften the sound of brass instruments in an orchestra. As for Storyville, that not only refers to the New Orleans bordello district, named after alderman Joseph Story who sponsored the legislation that created it, but has also lent its name to a jazz magazine and two different jazz labels, both of which Bechet was associated with.<sup>9</sup> We could go on piling up the puns and citations in this three-word unit: the point is that not only will different readers catch or miss different levels of signification, but that even those who register the identical shades of meaning might assign them different places in the hierarchy of value, thereby altering (if ever so slightly) the overall purport of the poem.

Narratologically, the clause 'Oh, play that thing!' is quite as vertiginous. Whose words are they? Is the imprecation to be read as Philip Larkin's, as the biographical criticism he sometimes espoused would have us believe ('novels are about other people and poetry is about yourself', *FR*, 24)? Is it uttered by a representative of the first of the four reading positions enumerated above, within whose section of the poem it appears to fall? Or does the fact that it follows a dash and a stanza break indicate that it is an excited interjection by the narrator, momentarily endorsing the equation between Bechet's colossal energy and the vitality of the French Quarter before going on to offer a rather different perspective of his or her own ('On *me* your voice falls ...')?

The difficulty in deciding who utters the words is compounded by the knowledge that they constitute a quotation in search of an originary source. From within the realms of literature the best candidate is probably 'Jazz Band in a Parisian Cabaret' by the African-American jazz poet Langston Hughes, the very first words of which are 'Play that thing ...!'<sup>10</sup> From the realm of Bechet recordings, the most likely contender is his sensational 1932 version of *Maple Leaf Rag* in the background to which a voice (possibly Bechet's own) can be heard shouting 'Play it, man, play it!' during Hank Duncan's piano solo.<sup>11</sup> By that date, however, the expression already had a considerable discological history so that any use of it came within several sets of quote marks. For instance, when the Fletcher Henderson Orchestra headhunted the rising star Louis Armstrong from

King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band they reworked the latter's 1923 *Dippermouth Blues* as *Sugar Foot Stomp* (1925), an unnamed vocalist repeating in parodic falsetto the earlier disc's urgent 'Oh, play that thing!' And when later that same year Armstrong left Henderson to form the celebrated Hot Five, he used the new outfit's recording of *Gut Bucket Blues* to introduce each member of the band in turn: 'Oh, play that thing Mr St Cyr', 'Oh, whip that thing Miss Lil', 'Oh, blow it Kid Ory, blow it Kid', etc. Anterior to all these scribal and recorded usages by the artists themselves are the countless exhortations of anonymous members of the jazz public: Jelly Roll Morton could remember the whores of the Monarch Saloon in Memphis (real 'Sporting-house girls') urging on the resident pianist with the shout 'O play it, Benny, play it!' in the period before the invention of the gramophone.<sup>12</sup> We began by asking whose are these words: is Larkin quoting Hughes quoting Jelly Roll Morton; or the narrator quoting Bechet quoting Armstrong quoting Henderson quoting King Oliver? No doubt a true jazz buff could quickly multiply the citations and demonstrate yet more forcibly the exegetical complexity of these four, misleadingly transparent monosyllables.

A larger, even more vexatious instance of the poem's susceptibility to interpretative variety such as it attributes to jazz pertains to the issue of whether or not the narrator's view of Bechet is definitive, or at least the most 'appropriate falsehood'. Certainly, V. Penelope Pelizzon takes that line in what is thus far one of the two most sustained critical analyses of the poem.<sup>13</sup> She bases this judgement on two factors: first, that the other interpretations relate Bechet's music to particular precincts of the city (the French Quarter, Storyville), suggesting a limited or partial perspective, whereas the narrator's view comprehends the whole of New Orleans; second, she takes the opening of the final sentence – 'My Crescent City/Is where your speech alone is understood' – to mean 'My view of New Orleans alone correctly represents what you are saying'.

For the present writer, by contrast, the 'all' in line three ('And in *all* ears appropriate falsehood wakes') is authoritative, encompassing the narrator's vision of New Orleans as surely as the others. Moreover, I parse the opening of the concluding sentence to mean 'In my New Orleans the only *lingua franca* is your jazz'. It is true that the simile 'Like an enormous yes' is so arresting that it lends the narrator's account of Bechet's jazz great weight. However, it is also true that this account is rendered less than decisive by its retinue of qualifiers ('as they say', 'should', 'like'). Besides, for all their differences, the four views are too complementary to leave much room for self-aggrandizement on the part of the narrator. After all, the first version of New Orleans depicts

a French Quarter characterized by *joie de vivre*, communality and sexual licence; the second concentrates exclusively on an image of commodified sex such as one finds in the 1912 Storyville photographs of E.J. Bellocq; the third on the obsessional dedication of the fanatic; and the fourth on a more expansive, affirmative love – nearer to *agapé* than *eros*. The fact that the four interpretations, although perceptibly different one from another, are all variants on the theme of love suggests that Larkin's poem is less an assertion of the narrator's viewpoint at the expense of the others, as Pelizzon claims, than a demonstration that Bechet's art is rich enough to sustain a plurality of overlapping readings. Such an assessment has the gratifying side effect of rescuing the narrator from the charge of big-headedness.

This last may be just as well since, whether or not Larkin intended it, his narrator is unreliable. The narrator ends the poem by crediting Bechet with the capacity to scatter 'long-haired grief and scored pity'. The opposing of a music of joy to one of sorrow is predicated on a deeper opposition between jazz and classical music – the latter traditionally being associated with hirsute maestros such as Toscanini, the most famous conductor of the day, and with a puctilious attention to the score. Bechet, by contrast, was a magisterial exponent of improvisation who never learned to read music (according to Jelly Roll Morton, 'he plays more music than you can put down on paper').<sup>14</sup> Yet the opposition is bogus – an 'appropriate falsehood' of the narrator's, perhaps. Bechet loved classical music: he kept a portrait of Beethoven on his wall; likened his own use of vibrato to that of his beloved Caruso; and with the aid of amenuenses composed extended works such as *The Negro Rhapsody*, the ballet suite *La nuit est un sorcière* and the operetta *New Orleans*. In the case of the celebrated 1939 recording of 'Summertime', which Larkin described as a demonstration of 'full-throated felicity' that 'made even the accompanists clap' (*AWJ*, 29), Bechet wittily inserted between the first and second choruses a quotation from a favourite opera, Leoncavallo's *I Pagliacci*. When we remember that the influence was reciprocal, Bechet sometimes being credited with a direct effect upon Stravinsky, the closing opposition seems simplistic and divisive.<sup>15</sup> Once again the narrator's view is found to be more fallible and less conclusive than Pelizzon suggests, leaving the reader with a limited plurality of viable interpretations to consider and adjudicate between.

There are other grounds for quarrelling with Pelizzon's essay: for example, she assumes that the music described is played on a clarinet when the poem does not specify the instrument and Bechet's preference was for the soprano sax; and she sees the depiction of the 'scholars *manqués*' as a wry

self-caricature by Larkin when his copious writings on jazz adopt the very opposite of their dusty approach ('A.E. Housman said he could recognise poetry because it made his throat tighten and his eyes water: I can recognise jazz because it makes me tap my foot, grunt affirmative exhortations, or even get up and caper round the room.' *AWJ*, 197). Yet the crucial issue is not the superiority (or otherwise) of my view as compared with hers, but rather the ambiguity and complexity of a poem which offers more than one hermeneutical route through it. Hence, the concluding sentence of 'For Sidney Bechet' is forever open to Pelizzon's reading and to mine; we disagree as to which meaning has primacy but neither of us can use our choice to vanquish the other and bring the poem to closure. This in turn illustrates how Larkin's poem demands active readership rather than passive consumption, refusing to offer itself up in a state of self-evidence, all 'at once and no trying at all'. Such dissensus, whether between different readers of Larkin or different listeners to Bechet, also puts paid to the Realist belief in a consensual, self-explanatory world that is somehow 'out there' waiting to be xeroxed. ('It was just the transcription of a very happy afternoon. It only needed writing down.') Instead, the emphasis of 'For Sidney Bechet' is entirely upon the power of art to generate different realities, the power of readers to generate different versions of that art and the singularity of those art works which are particularly plenitudinous in the production of meanings (not so much 'anybody could have done it' as only Bechet – or Larkin – could have). Above all, the explanatory model adopted by the poem is one which accepts that pre-Parker jazz such as that of Sidney Bechet was already the epitome of Modernist aesthetics.

Of course, it might be rejoined that while Larkin accepts Modernist aesthetics in theory, his verse forms are largely regular and unadventurous – that he is, at most, a Realist with a Modernist sensibility. There is considerable truth in this, Larkin's contribution to an emergent Postmodernism stemming in part from his forging of new amalgams from the traditional and the Modernist inheritances. Nonetheless, 'For Sidney Bechet' is formally far less predictable and far more dislocated than might be thought. At seventeen lines, it is three lines too many for a sonnet, two lines too few for a villanelle, one line too many to be divisible into quatrains and one line too few for tercets. Larkin's thoroughly idiosyncratic solution appears to combine the worst of both worlds by dividing the poem into tercets, with a last stanza that is one line deficient, and then superimposing an abab rhyme scheme more appropriate to the quatrain, the penultimate line of the poem breaking the rhyme pattern by being supplementary to it. The resulting hybrid approximates but never

congeals into a number of traditional forms: the Shakespearian sonnet (with its abab cdcd efef gg rhyme scheme); the *quatorzain* of Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind* (aba bcb cdc ded ee); *terza rima*, a three-line stanza form rhyming aba bcb cdc and usually ending with a single line (xyx y); the villanelle (with its three-line stanzas and opening aba rhyme scheme); and the Caudate sonnet (from the Latin word *cauda*, meaning a tail or coda), in which the usual fourteen-line form is augmented by an extra couplet preceded by an introductory half line. At sixteen and a half lines, this last is very close in duration to Larkin's model, but the version of the sonnet usually adopted when adding 'tails' is the Petrarchan, which has a totally different rhyme scheme (*octave*: abba bba: *sestet*: cdecde or cdcddc).

The same calculated frustrating of expectations takes place at the level of line-length and rhythm. What at first appears to be pentametric is in practice quite irregular, with one line of nine syllables, seven of ten syllables, eight of eleven syllables and one of twelve syllables. The inconsistent addition and subtraction of syllables to or from the anticipated row of ten works to vary time and pitch, delaying stresses and modulating the residually iambic rhythm. As William Harmon has pointed out, there is even a hint of 'ragging' in 'the finely syncopated rhythm in the last line – trochee, iamb, spondee, iamb, trochee – where the scazon [the substitution of a trochee for the concluding iamb] delivers the final rhyme a syllable sooner than our ear expects'.<sup>16</sup> Such deviations from the norm may be modest compared to the free verse fireworks of Modernists like Cummings, Apollinaire, Mayakovsky and Marinetti, but they accord very well with the views T.S. Eliot expressed in his 1942 essay 'The Music of Poetry':

As for 'free verse', I expressed my view twenty-five years ago by saying that no verse is free for the man who wants to do a good job. ... Only a bad poet could welcome free verse as a liberation from form. It was a revolt against dead form, and a preparation for new form or the renewal of the old; it has an insistence upon the inner unity which is unique to every poem, against the outer unity which is typical.<sup>17</sup>

The reference back a quarter of a century with which this quotation begins is to Eliot's 1917 essay 'Reflections on *Vers Libre*' in which he again anticipates some aspects of Larkin's practice. The proposition that 'the ghost of some simple metre should lurk behind the arras in even



the “freest” verse’ is very close to the way in which iambic pentameters and a variety of sonnet structures shadow ‘For Sidney Bechet’. The following passage is also peculiarly pertinent:

And this liberation from rhyme might as well be a liberation of rhyme. Freed from its exacting task of supporting lame verse, it could be applied with greater effect where it is most needed. There are often passages in an unrhymed poem where rhyme is wanted for some special effect, for a sudden tightening-up, for a cumulative insistence, or for an abrupt change of mood.

‘For Sidney Bechet’ is neither ‘lame verse’ nor ‘an unrhymed poem’, but it does liberate rhyme, set it loose, in pursuit of ‘some special effect’ specific to the task at hand. Consider, for example, the terrific spinal column of syllables ending in ‘d’ that, vertebra by vertebra, provides the poem with its hidden backbone: hold – [false]hood – quad[rilles] – fad[s] – nod – plaid[s] – should – [under]stood – good; all, perhaps, deriving from Sid[ney] in the title. Notice the musical pattern created by the superabundance of present participles: narrowing – rising – Building – making – going – grouping – Sporting – scattering. Two smaller series of pararhymes, the shake[s] – wake[s] – mak[ing] and the play – may – *manqués* – they – say sequences, combine to produce an extended assonantal chain based on the shared ‘a’ sound, possibly sparked off by the second syllable (pronounced ‘shay’) of Bechet’s surname. We could go on to list many more uses of internal rhyme (the Sidney – balconie[s] – on me – City – pity sequence, for instance), as well as quite other effects such as alliteration (‘natural noise’, etc.) and a plethoric use of sibilants (license, circus, priced, yes, Crescent). What is already apparent is that the prosody, the total sound-system of the poem, is much more densely orchestrated than usual – so much so that I gave up marking the melodic effects in my own copy for fear of completely obliterating the text. This is a poem that endeavours not just to describe music but to enact it, in the process achieving an aural richness that, if not exactly experimental, does have affinities with the more sonorous Modernists such as Hopkins, Yeats, Eliot and Dylan Thomas. As early as 1942, in a letter to James Sutton, Larkin had written: ‘Jazz and poetry are my life, my life’.<sup>18</sup> Twelve years later, in ‘For Sidney Bechet’, he brings the two arts together in a shared relation to Modernist aesthetics that thoroughly confounds his own Realist propaganda.

### III Larkin's racial ideology

At the time of the poem's composition, Sidney Bechet was alive and living in France as a fifty-six-year-old exile from American racism. Back in 1910, when the precocious thirteen-year-old Bechet first started playing in adult jazz bands, twenty-one Negroes were lynched because the white American heavyweight boxer Jim Jeffries lost a world title fight with the black American champion Jack Johnson. In 1918, the year before Bechet joined the northward migration of New Orleans jazz musicians, seventy-eight African-Americans were lynched, in part as a warning to black soldiers returning from the First World War that they should not expect at home the freedoms they had enjoyed while fighting abroad for their country. Throughout the inter-war period, Bechet and his fellow black musicians had to enter by the back door the venues in which they were starring, had trouble booking hotel rooms, were refused food at public diners, were ignored by taxi drivers and, when it came to cutting discs, were paid a small recording fee with no royalties. In 1933, Bechet and trumpeter Tommy Ladnier opened a tailor's shop in Harlem in an endeavour to make ends meet, Bechet pressing clothes and Ladnier doing shoeshine. Nor did things improve much after the Second World War: in 1946 a jazz concert in the Constitutional Hall of Washington D.C., the nation's capital, was banned on the grounds that one of the performers – Sidney Bechet – was black. In 1950, after many previous visits, some of them protracted, he emigrated to Europe. In 1954, the year in which Larkin completed 'For Sidney Bechet', the United States Supreme Court pronounced that separate educational facilities for black and white children were 'inherently unequal', and the following year schools were ordered to proceed to desegregation with 'all deliberate speed'. It was not until the end of the following year, on 1 December 1955, in Montgomery, Alabama, that Mrs Rosa L. Parks, a forty-three-year-old seamstress, refused a bus driver's order to vacate her seat to a white man and was arrested, charged and fined. The ensuing Montgomery bus boycott was the spark that ignited the Civil Rights Movement and brought to the fore leaders of the distinction of Martin Luther King. Three years later, Sidney Bechet was dead from cancer.

Meanwhile, back in 1941 a bespectacled, stammering, English teenager named Philip Larkin, whose father was an admirer of Hitler, was writing to his pal Jim Sutton: 'I rushed out on Monday and bought "Nobody Knows The Way I Feel This Morning". Fucking, cunting, bloody good! Bechet is a great artist. As soon as he starts playing you

automatically stop thinking about anything else and listen. Power and glory.<sup>19</sup> In 1952 this same Larkin, who had a pathological fear of foreign travel and preferred listening to jazz on record than in live performance, was visiting a Parisian night club under the misapprehension that the Claude Luter band would that night be featuring its regular star guest, Sidney Bechet.<sup>20</sup> Throughout the rest of his life in numerous reviews of jazz records and books Larkin reiterated his admiration for the 'irreplaceable vitality' (*AWJ*, 205) of 'the incomparable master of the soprano sax' (*AWJ*, 82), the 'Roi Soleil of jazz' (*AWJ*, 221). In one representative passage, Larkin rapturously enthuses about

... the marvelous 'Blue Horizon', six choruses of slow blues in which Bechet climbs without interruption or hurry from lower to upper register, his clarinet tone at first thick and throbbing, then soaring like Melba in an extraordinary blend of lyricism and power that constituted the unique Bechet voice, commanding attention the instant it sounded.

(*AWJ*, 29)

This piece was played at the memorial service for Philip Larkin which was held in Westminster Abbey on, appropriately enough, St Valentine's Day, 1986. The love affair had continued beyond the grave.

One of the functions of this historical excursion is to foreground Larkin's cognizance that the contemporaneity of jazz ultimately derived from black Americans' uniquely unpleasant exposure to the acids of modernity. He constantly reminded his readers that 'It is an irony almost too enormous to be noticed that the thorough penetration of Anglo-Saxon civilization by Afro-American culture by means of popular music is a direct, though long term, result of the abominable slave trade' (*LJ*, 83). He knew that in embracing this music whites were tacitly acknowledging historical guilt: 'there is a curious logic in the world's enthusiastic response to the music of the Negro, as if in some gigantic Jungian case-history where salvation is shown to lie in whatever is most feared and despised' (*LJ*, 41). He also recognized that this secular redemption or catharsis only worked because certain black artists had the creative genius necessary for 'this achieved paradox of turning suffering, misery and injustice into a new kind of music' (*LJ*, 44). In the process, these artists provided the best available role model for Larkin's own poetic project of transfiguring suffering into aesthetic pleasure, pain into beauty. Hence, his tendency to equate jazz with the blues and to choose his musical heroes accordingly: 'There are not many perfect things in jazz, but Bechet playing the Blues

could be one of them' (*LJ*, 45).<sup>21</sup> His position, then, is anti-essentialist, refusing to *naturalize* jazz by attributing it to an inherent Africanness on a racial model: 'The Negro did not have the blues because he was naturally melancholy. He had them because he was cheated and bullied and starved' (*AWJ*, 87). He was also finely aware that to see jazz as biologically black would not only belittle great white practitioners like Bix Beiderbecke, Pee Wee Russell and Eddie Condon, but would also incur 'the resentment felt by Negro musicians at the idea that jazz is "natural" to them, and that they therefore deserve no great applause for playing it' (*AWJ*, 63). In this regard, Larkin's position was identical with Bechet's, for as the latter's biographer records: 'Sidney always fidgetted when [the clarinetist Mezz] Mezzrow said that, although he had a white skin, he was really a Negro at heart. Years later Bechet told a Scandinavian friend, Dr Terkild Winding: "Mezz should know that race does not matter – it is hitting the notes right that counts."<sup>22</sup>

The brouhaha that greeted the miserable racism of the later entries in Larkin's *Selected Letters* and the drunken tapes he made with Monica Jones in his declining years has not been matched by a comparable attention to the radicalism and cosmopolitanism of the racial ideology of his jazz writings, whether in verse or prose. 'For Sidney Bechet' was written at a time when children's literature (from Enid Blyton to the *Beano*) was replete with patronizing racial stereotypes, when leading British statesmen routinely expressed the view that Africans were too childlike to govern their own affairs,<sup>23</sup> when the top-grossing 1955 film *The Dam Busters* could unblushingly depict its anti-Nazi hero Guy Gibson with a pet dog called Nigger, and when blackface coonery was perfectly acceptable on BBC television (the most notorious example, *The Black and White Minstrel Show*, was not launched until four years *after* Larkin's poem and was discontinued as recently as 1978).<sup>24</sup> For a quarter of a century, Larkin was ahead of the dominant culture; by the time it caught up with him, his poetic gift had evaporated and in his private misery he sometimes lapsed into the very racism his muse had deplored.

That the poetry is indeed racially progressive can be confirmed by a cursory reconsideration of the issue of narratology. We have already demonstrated that the narrator of 'For Sidney Bechet' subsumes into the prevailing discourse a limited plurality of alternative viewpoints or reading positions (see Figure 1.1). We have also remarked that the four-word unit 'Oh, play that thing!' parades before the reader a dizzying array of possible 'authors'. We can now add that this extraordinary polyphony (and Larkin's poems are far less monological than is commonly acknowledged) works to unhouse racial certitudes.<sup>25</sup> Hence, of the nine putative

For Sidney Bechet

<p>Everyone who responds to New Orleans jazz pictures the city differently.</p>	<p>That note you hold, narrowing and rising, shakes Like New Orleans reflected on the water, And in all ears appropriate falsehood wakes,</p>
<p>1. Some think of the French Quarter.</p>	<p>Building for some a legendary Quarter Of balconies, flower-baskets and quadrilles, Everyone making love and going shares—</p>
<p>2. Some think of Storyville.</p>	<p>Oh, play that thing! Mute glorious Storyvilles Others may license, grouping around their chairs Sporting-house girls like circus tigers (priced</p>
<p>3. Some become obsessed with the personnel of the jazz bands.</p>	<p>Far above rubies) to pretend their fads, While scholars <i>manqués</i> nod around unnoticed Wrapped up in personnels like old plaids.</p>
<p>4. Our narrator responds to the New Orleans sound as “the natural noise of good”, “Like an enormous yes”.</p>	<p>On me your voice falls as they say love should, Like an enormous yes. My Crescent City Is where your speech alone is understood,</p>
	<p>And greeted as the natural noise of good, Scattering long-haired grief and scored pity.</p>

Figure 1.1

authors we ascribed to 'Oh, play that thing!' in a list that was far from exhaustive, only one is assuredly white (Philip Larkin); three are racially unspecified (the narrator, the representative of the first reading position and the Memphis whores); while five are black (Langston Hughes, Sidney Bechet, Louis Armstrong, Fletcher Henderson and King Oliver).

Even if the reader of 'For Sidney Bechet' after due consideration decides that the predominant narrative idiom is British, perhaps specifically English, its enormous yes of love is still international, indeed transcontinental. If the reader goes further and perceives the prevailing narrative to carry a 'white' inflection, then the enormous yes of love it describes is a cross-racial one. If the reader feels that the narrative is gendered 'male', then the enormous yes of love is a cross-racial but same-sex one. And whatever the reader feels, the poem indisputably articulates a high art love for popular culture that transgresses the critical orthodoxy of the day as established and policed by the likes of F.R. Leavis and Clement Greenberg. (In the very year the poem was begun Greenberg was complaining that 'our culture, on its lower and popular levels, has plumbed abysses of vulgarity and falsehood unknown in the discoverable past'; to which Larkin's 'I can live a week without poetry but not a day without jazz' forms the perfect riposte).<sup>26</sup> In short, 'For Sidney Bechet' displays more audacity, transgressivity and sophistication regarding racial, sexual and cultural politics than any of its commentators has recognized or Larkin would have cared to admit.

One last shaft of ideological awareness we might note concerns the tidal flow of the love in question, which is from the jazz musician to the grateful fan. If the narrator shares the author's race, then the love flows from black to white, making the narrator's position the very opposite of the self-aggrandizement of those whites who flaunt political correctness by adopting a black pal as a kind of accessory ('some of my best friends ...'). Rather, the enormous yes of Bechet's jazz comes like the undeserved but enabling benediction described in 'Faith Healing', the poem that immediately precedes this one in *The Whitsun Weddings*:

In everyone there sleeps  
 A sense of life lived according to love.  
 To some it means the difference they could make  
 By loving others, but across most it sweeps  
 As all they might have done had they been loved.  
 (CP, 126)

The expression 'On me your voice falls *as they say love should*' (my emphasis) suggests that our narrator is affirmed by the jazz as never by God, parents, spouse or lover; in the words of 'Faith Healing', Bechet vouchsafes our narrator 'A sense of life lived according to love'.

The significance of this is lost on B.J. Leggett, whose *Larkin's Blues* provides what is thus far the most extended analysis of the poem. Leggett takes as his predicate Eric Hobsbawm's observation that 'the jazz fan, however knowledgeable, is fundamentally a lover. While old-style pop music ... crystallized and preserved the relation of human beings in love ("They're playing our song"), jazz, more often than not, is itself the love object for its devotees'. Leggett adds: 'The convention of the jazz "lover" – jazz as the love object rather than the background music for love – is crucial to readings of two of Larkin's later jazz poems, "Reasons For Attendance" and "For Sidney Bechet."'27 In point of fact, 'Reasons For Attendance' does not disclose that the dance music involved is jazz.<sup>28</sup> More pressingly, while Leggett registers that 'For Sidney Bechet' is essentially a love poem, he misses its closing reversal of the jazz fan as lover convention. This may seem a minor distinction, but in terms of racial politics it is vital: our narrator is the humbled recipient of black love rather than the proud dispenser of white love to the ethnically inferiorized. Larkin's emphasis on the jazz exponent as the lover grants Bechet an agency that Leggett's emphasis on the fan as lover would deny. This is, indeed, the most direct expression in Larkin's *oeuvre* of what it feels like to be illuminated by another's love. Here as elsewhere, the poet's radicalism eludes even his best explicators.

We began with Larkin's notorious proposition that Charlie Parker is the Picasso of jazz, the man whose undeniable genius rendered the art form Modernist and in the process replaced its massive popular following with a minority audience of academics and *aficionados*. This essay has sought to demonstrate that Larkin always knew this argument to be specious and reductive, his writings on Sidney Bechet showing a lively appreciation of the fact that the jazz of this earlier era was already Modernist and in ways he sometimes wished to emulate. Let us end with a brief reference to Louis Armstrong, that other giant of the New Orleans style and arguably the only jazz musician Larkin ranked above Bechet. Eighteen months after the publication of *All What Jazz*, with its tabloid caricature of the Cubist artist who 'painted portraits with both eyes on the same side of the nose' (*AWJ*, 11), Larkin wrote in the following terms to Charles Monteith commending the

idea of Faber publishing a critical study of Armstrong: 'it is already accepted – or if it isn't, it soon will be – that Louis Armstrong was an enormously important cultural figure of our century, more important than Picasso in my opinion, but certainly quite comparable ...' (SL, 443). Even by Larkin's standards this is an almost farcical *volte-face*: in 1971, Armstrong is lauded for that which in 1970 Parker was abominated – namely, his comparability to Picasso! And unless Euclid was very much mistaken in the belief that if A and B are equal to C then A and B are equal to each other, it follows that if Armstrong and Parker are comparable to Picasso, then they are comparable to each other; and that if Picasso and Parker are Modernist, so must Armstrong be. In other words, not only does Larkin's artistic practice confound his own propaganda, but the propaganda is so riddled with contradiction as frequently to confound itself. The time has passed when responsible critics can predicate a literary evaluation upon Larkin's curmudgeonly persona and fitful anti-Modernist ravings. As we said at the start, he loved and learned from many aspects of Modernist music and literature, but lied about it: the proof is to be found in the only place that matters, in the poems.



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