The poems of *The Less Deceived* (and also the volume as a coherent text) provide ample evidence that although Larkin thought of his responsibility to experience as a guiding principle, he also doubted that it could serve as an organizing and constructive force in poetry. Facing and representing this paradox played a central role in the unexpected success of the book.

In this volume the most important experience to be transferred into the verbal form of poetry is the passing of time. In some of the central poems he transformed the experience of time into metaphors of space, a method he kept on using in his later poetry.¹ This is sometimes analogous with the representation of time units, with the difference that when time is envisioned as space, it is frequently indivisible. Such poems are typically those in which Larkin, overtly or covertly, applies the technique of photography. In some other cases (most spectacularly in the poems about train journeys) visible continuity in space is constructed as a metaphor of time.

**Photography and the past**

The opening poem of *The Less Deceived* is “Lines on a Young Lady’s Photograph Album”.² It is easy to find this position symbolic: this is the

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¹ This method strengthened the symbolism of some parts of the poems. In “The Rhetoric of Temporality” Paul de Man writes that in a symbol (in contrast with allegories) the connection between reality and its representation is spatial rather than temporal. Andrew Motion draws attention to the typically symbolic function of the image of “sand-clouds” in “Dockery and Son”, an image that has “no precise connection with the poem’s dominant pattern of images”. Motion adds that “they fleetingly fulfil the function that Yeats expected of symbolism” (*Philip Larkin*, Contemporary Writers series, 14). As I mentioned previously, a further example of the same symbolism is the image in the last two lines of “The Whitsun Weddings”.

first significant volume of the central figure of the Movement, which has itself been characterized as “creative photography”. On the other hand, Andrew Motion has pointed out Larkin’s ambivalent attitude: although this poem can really be read as a prototype of Movement verse, it also alludes to its limits, since it “expressly states the losses of a narrowly literal attitude to experience”. The duality of Larkin’s belief and disbelief in experience as the only source of poetry can particularly be seen in these lines: “But O, photography! as no art is, / Faithful and disappointing!” This is what Movement poetry can also become: “faithful” but “disappointing”, which latter suggests something discouraging and deceptive at the same time. It will be noticed that the reference to “disappointment” is both to the experience represented by photography and the photos themselves (also as metonyms of art).

The text is a symbolic love poem; however, its symbolism is concealed by the realism of descriptive details, the mimetic level of the text and its referential language. Larkin wrote it to Winifred Arnott, the woman he was in love with in Belfast, and if one reads it in the context of his letters to her, it is also the basic text of a long discourse of love. Its sexual symbols are overt: the woman offers her own self by letting him have the album (“At last you yielded up the album”); the male speaker first wants to satisfy his eyes (“My swivel eye hungers from pose to pose”); then, jealously, he separates her from his rivals (“Not quite your class, I’d say, dear, on the whole”). The photographs he is watching make him believe (either by convincing him or deceiving him) that the experience of possessing the woman is a real one: “That this is a real girl in a real place,

4 Motion, Philip Larkin, Contemporary Writers series, 83.
5 Ibid., 82.
6 The “Statement” refers to non-literary experience as the only authentic source of good verse, but Larkin keeps on questioning his own thesis. What he wrote in a letter to Winifred Arnott about the poem also reveals the paradox richly represented in the text: “The Album starts pedestrianly, I’m afraid, but verses 4-6 and the last one satisfy me. Between them, they constitute a sort of ave-atque-vale, the two of them” (Selected Letters, 225). The “pedestrian” part may be inferior to the rest of the poem, but it is needed as a gesture of preserving a situation. The “hail and farewell” that Larkin points out is also a signifier of the poet’s attitude to experience and literature.

7 It would be out place here to enter the debate as to whether private letters should be treated as parts of a writer’s life work. My position is this: once they have been published we cannot ignore them.