Wants

'Wants' is an important poem because it reveals an attitude which lies at the heart of much of Larkin's poetry. In 'Reasons for Attendance' and 'Dry-Point' we have seen how he rejects the idea that happiness is to be found in the communality of ordinary social and sexual life. 'Wants' comes as a logical conclusion in proposing that our natural condition is of isolation and that, given the disappointment and suffering inherent in existence, what we most yearn for is non-existence.

The poem captures a sense of weariness, felt in the sluggish iambic pentameter of the two refrains ('Beyond all this, the wish to be alone', and 'Beneath it all, desire of oblivion runs') with their heavy mid-line caesuras (pauses), and in the structural parallelism of the two stanzas. Each is a single sentence opening and closing with the same line and a three-line 'list' coming in between. The effect is of exhaustion and monotony as the sentence toils through the intervening lines to a repetition of its opening – lines which are themselves metrically more clumsy than the refrain. In those two refrains, we find a weary vagueness, a curt dismissiveness: 'Beyond all this', 'Beneath it all' suggest how life both confines us (we want to go 'beyond') and weighs heavily on us (we have to dig 'beneath' it). The first stanza declares our need for solitariness in the face of oppressive and cramping social demands: invitation-cards obscure the sky threateningly; sexual activity is routinely mechanical (following 'printed directions') and family loyalty is a matter of tribal convention ('the flagstaff' suggests a spurious unity). The second stanza proposes that far from trying to escape death, we fundamentally yearn for our own annihilation. However much we plan for the future or seem to ward off death (taking out life insurance as protection, having children to carry on the family line, refusing to contemplate death) what we actually want is 'oblivion'.

The poem suggests that a desire for anything other than solitariness and death is an illusion. The images of communality in the first stanza are all hollow; similarly, the second stanza implies that by turning away from the inevitability of death we turn towards illusion. Expectations in the future can only be disappointed: the 'tensions of the calendar' are 'artful', deceptively raising and then dashing our hopes. The phrase 'life insurance' is a lie because nothing in life (except death) can be guaranteed; 'tabled fertility rites', like 'the printed directions of sex', sounds aridly mechanical and even ignorantly pagan; we avert our eyes from death at some cost because we pay for it in our illusions.

If 'Wants' is a bleak poem, it is nevertheless an attempt by Larkin to express what he sees as the truth about existence. The abruptness of the title sounds clamouring, demanding; the poem surprises by its steady gravity and the simplicity of its 'wants'. If we find other poems by Larkin (such as 'Wedding-Wind') much more celebratory of life, Larkin is not so much contradicting himself as expressing different moods, one in which he is responsive to the beauty of life, another in which he exposes the truth of his vision of it.