DIFFERENT VOICES IN THE POETRY OF PHILIP LARKIN

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INTRODUCTION

Larkin occupies a unique position in the post-war literature. Larkin’s position and reputation in the modern literature rests on just four volumes of poetry, viz, The North Ship (1945); The Less Deceived (1955); The Whitsun Weddings (1964) and High Windows (1974). To put in the words of Andrew Motion, "The Less Deceived made his name; The Whitsun Weddings made him famous; High Windows turned him into a National Monument." Apart from these volumes of poetry, Larkin is credited to have written two novels – Jill and A Girl in Winter. Larkin has also published a book on jazz criticism titled All What Jazz (1970). Moreover, he edited The Oxford Book of Twentieth Century Verse (1973) suggesting "the esteem in which he is held in the literary world." The earlier general impression of Larkin as a minor writer has, of course, been replaced by a critical opinion of a more favourable kind admiring Larkin’s various voices engaged in fundamental existentialist questions of identity, chance and choice, isolation and community and discovery of truth. The analyses of his poems will reveal that “Larkin often writes out of a much more complex set of feelings than he is commonly credited with.”

Larkin’s poetry has been a subject of robust criticism. There seems to be a tug of war among Larkin’s critics as they are hardly united on any issue related to his poetry and his acclaim as a poet – whether it is the question of the poet's development or his allegiance to 'Movement Poetry' or to place him in the category of Romantics or Classics, or his being a minor poet or a major poet or the idea of Englishness, provincialism in his poetry. A major milestone in the field of Larkin’s criticism was the publication of official biography by Andrew Motion under the title Philip Larkin: A Writer’s Life (1993). The purpose of the book was to “alter the image of Larkin that he prepared so carefully for his readers.”

A new kind of poetry called 'Movement Poetry' emerged in early 1950’s. The poets included in the movement group as identified by D.J.Enright's anthology, Poets of the 1950’s (1955) and Robert Conquest's New Lines (1956) were Thom Gunn, Elizabeth, Jennings, Donald Daive,
Kingsley Amis, John Wain, John Holloway, Robert Conquest and Philip Larkin. The Movement poets addressed everyday British life in plain, straight-forward language and in traditional forms. The other reason, apart from the simple language, narrow range of ideas and humble themes, for which Larkin's poetry is associated with the movement poetry is his ideas about the relationship of poetry and its audience. Equality and faith were called to be the very bases of the relationship between the poet and his readers. Larkin believes that like all art, the aim of poetry is to give pleasure and “if a poet loses his pleasure-seeking audience he has lost the only audience worth having”\(^5\). One cannot deny that some of the themes like loss and regret, retirement and the glory of past are typical of the movement poetry, But on the other hand, faith in determinism, diction and metaphysical mode are perfectly his own. In fact, Larkin's two collections of poetry, viz, *The Whitsun Weddings* and *High Windows* published in 1964 and 1974 respectively much after the decade specific literary movement prove in themselves that theme sand language of Larkin's poetry are too deep and extensive to be narrowed and confined to any short term literary activities. Larkin's talents and qualities are very much his own and he cannot be contained within a category or school. That is why Roger Day defends Larkin by commenting "the simple fact is that Larkin's was by far the greatest talent of that 'group', so it is hardly surprising that his work, in its singularity, was both part of the 'Movement' and yet beyond it."\(^6\) One of the major themes of Larkin’s poems is the theme of dreams and illusions. Hope seems to be elusive. The concept of time is an important aspect of Larkin's poetry where his personae repeatedly find themselves being diminished by the passage of time and non-fulfillment of future expectations. It is strange habit of mankind that they choose to live in a constant state of restless expectation of fulfillment of their desires and thoughts in future alone:

> Always too eager for the future, we
> Pick up bad habits of expectancy.
> Something is always approaching; every day
> Till then we say, (CP 50)

We wait for the “Sparkling armada of promises”. The result of waiting for new and good life turns out only to be the "wretched stalks /of disappointment." We have to remain limited to the present which shows the ruins of the past and signs of thrilling imaginary future as this ship “never anchors, it’s/No sooner present than it turns to past” and they disappear on the horizon.
Throughout our life, forgetful of the present or the past, two other very important temporal factors of human existence, we desire to live in a never-ending state of restless expectation of fulfillment of our desires and thoughts in future alone:

We think each one will heave to and unload
All good into our lives, all we are owed
For waiting so devoutly and so long. (CP 50)

We feel thrilled at the thought of our wishes to be fulfilled very soon. This goes on till the day to discover that only one ship is seeking us:

Sailed unfamiliar, towing at her back
A huge and bird less silence. In her wake
No waters breed or break. (CP 50)

The ultimate ship that reaches the shore is starkly opposite in colour and shape than the one we, like the personae, keep waiting in patiently throughout life-an illusion of false promises that seem to break the perennial nature of time. The thematic dichotomy between the real and the ideal, that is, death and hope is so well laid out in the use of language also. The ship of hope is decorated; “flagged and the figurehead with golden tits” whereas the ship of death is “unfamiliar” as death is a stranger and it tows “bird less silence.”

Man, at each step of his life, has to face limitations, and his wishes and assumptions all lead to illusions because “Our element is time”(CP 111). Larkin brings forth the illusory nature of choice and a gloomy view of human destiny very emphatically in poem after poem. For example, “Wires” deals with the idea of limitations that fetter each life. Our lives are inevitably circumscribed. We come to recognise life’s limits through unrewarding and painful attempts to go beyond them in youth. Larkin conveys this idea by adopting a kind of allegory. The poem presents cattle that are restricted to a field which is surrounded by an electric fence without a break in it. The experiences of old cattle have made them know enough not to attempt to break through the wires. But the young ones feel discontented with the life within the fencing. They have an inner urge for a better existence which they dream somewhere beyond the wires:

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.(CP 57)

The poem, talking about encroachment and enclosure at the same time, declares that the object of yearning is always “not here but anywhere.” The subject of the poem is desire and the inevitability of disappointment. The poem beautifully depicts the psychological transformation of the “young steers” into submissive “old cattle” and projects a change from innocence to experience, from the world of idealism to reality.

The wide gulf between generations and the choices brought in the post-war period for younger generation due to change in social set up is the most striking feature of Larkin's poetry. Poems like “Money”, "Vers De Société", "This be Verse" and "Annus Mirabilis" are the expressions for the collusion of dreams. The result of this experience is in the form of frustration and disappointment. The younger generation is moving away from the ethics of the society leading an immoral life. Now the youth is much free and unrestricted to lead their ways through the joys of life which the poet cannot experience. The poem “Reasons for Attendance” develops from a particular event where the poem's narrator is drawn by “the trumpet's voice, laud and authoritative” through the “lighted glass” at the dancers inside who are

all under twenty five -
Shifting intently, face to flushed face,
Solemnly on the beat of happiness.(CP 48)

The speaker in the poem knows that dancers are attracted by a sexual desire, and for a long moment wonders what it would be like to be inside and enjoying "the wonderful feel of girls." Thus he declares:

Or so I fancy, sensing the smoke and sweat,
The wonderful feel of girls. Why be out here?
But then, why be in there? Sex, yes, but what
Is sex ?(CP 48)
Believing that happiness is not to be extracted from any single and fixed source, the speaker remains outside, away from the dancers, who get happiness in their own separate way:

Therefore I stay outside,
Believing this; and they maul to and fro,
Believing that; and both are satisfied,
If one has misjudged himself. Or lied. (CP 48)

Under the cover of humour, the poem presents a genuine and serious reflection on the choices individuals can make in life, ending in an inconclusive way. Larkin feels morally injured at the fall of values in contemporary society and the approach of younger generation in the post-war society. The moral values lost in the bleakness of city life and consumerism attitude project the status of women as mere commodities in the poems like “The Large Cool Store”, “Sunny Prestatyn” and “Essential Beauty.”

A major charge against Larkin as a poet is that he is a limited poet just to the subjects like death, pessimism and time etc. This charge does not hold true as there are poems like “Water”, “Solar”, “Spring”, “Coming”, “Livings” and “The Whitsun Weddings” which contain the moments of transcendence and epiphany. “Wedding Wind” is completely a happy poem of Larkin in which we find the total acceptance of joy. The poem portrays the happiness of the young woman on the morning after her wedding night. The bride finds this ecstatic moment unbearable on account of the excessive joy which the wind has embodied for her. Out of happiness, she asks:

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 bed?

Can even death dry up
These new delighted lakes, conclude
Our kneeling as cattle by all-generous waters? (CP 45)

Similarly the ending of the poem “Trees”

Yet still the unresting castles thresh
In full grown thickness every May.
Last year is dead, they seem to say,

Being afresh, afresh, afresh.(CP 124)

is a declaration that the natural world is beautiful, restorative and necessary. The last line of the poem, “Begin afresh, afresh, afresh”, suggests a sort of continuity in the spring season by carrying the readers to the very first lines of the poem “the trees are coming into leaf.” Larkin’s positivity is seen in the celebration of varieties of communal experience in the poems like “Show Saturday”, “The Whitsun Weddings” and “To The Sea.” Such experiences are symbols of strength, renewal and unity in multiplicity. The speaker’s deep urge for the social, communal activity to go on and his desire to preserve values is clearly reflected in the last line of “Show Saturday”:

Regenerate union. Let it always be there.(CP 151)

“The Whitsun Weddings” is a journey poem which expresses the mysterious importance of the “frail/travelling coincidence.” The poem ends with this visionary moment extended:

We slowed again,

And as the tightened brakes took hold, there swelled

A sense of falling, like an arrow - shower

Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain.(CP 94)

The image of the “arrow-shower” hints at the setting off each couple in their own direction and the ending of the journey for those on board as well as the idea of fertility and continuity.

The various voices of Larkin, the poet, reflect him to be a sincere and honest poet who has represented myriad shades of human life in its true colour. The post-war period was full of anxiety, despair and a sense of loss – religious and moral values – prevailed in the society. A man is always in the grip of time but the message is that he can feel the moment of happiness and satisfaction by having a sense of community and feeling the elemental presence as a part of his life.

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4. Motion xx.


Philip Larkin is still highly regarded today as one of the most popular of British poets, technically astute in his portrayals of British life, the bespectacled explorer of events both urban and pastoral. He was however a reluctant poet, never fully at ease with his popularity, shunning the limelight and presenting himself as a somewhat pessimistic purveyor of poetics. So typical of Larkin. In the poem, the speaker acknowledges the unfathomable yet is resigned to the fact that both tree and human will eventually succumb to the natural processes constantly at work, impossible to avoid. The Trees. The trees are communicating again, only this time the language is different, more optimistic, declaring a repeated renewal, assonance rich, like a mantra - a new beginning is possible. Philip Larkin's poetry has begun to provoke quite a harvest of academic studies, in England at least. In the second poem a variety of voices join, to form a narrative with inset dialogues; the language is at times extremely colloquial British English (Sod all), at times it might come from Marvell (the bestial visor) or some such earlier writer. These strong contrasts are a major part of the challenge that reading the poems of Philip Larkin presents. There has not yet been time for a critical consensus to arise as to where his art is finest, or how it might best be read. Yet how different the readers' response to, say, poems mocking marriage, if they are read as strident authorial declarations, or as parodies of stereotyped attitudes. Multiple readings have been made of the poem that ends.