

PHILIP LARKIN'S POETICS AND PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

This essay encompasses the episodic life and works of Philip Larkin. At the close of the Second World War, Philip Larkin emerged as one of the leading poets in England. This study attempts to analyze the principles and styles of the English poet Philip Larkin's writing as a representative of the provincialism of the 20th century. The premise of this research was impelled by the generally agreed view that every poet has his own way of writing. It can also provide insights as to how Philip Larkin ways of writing have been used to express his ideas and themes. The study mainly dwells on selected principles that have specific features as their main focus and which show how Larkin utilized these principles as a model in his writing. Such poetic principles of Larkin could be used to illustrate how the study of Larkin might contribute to an understanding of his ideas during England post war period. The research shows that the English poet, Philip Larkin had a special way of creating poems that are appealing to readers due to the ease of understanding and the opportunity of relating to the context.

KEYWORDS: Poetic styles; tradition; poetry; Philip Larkin.

INTRODUCTION

Poetry as a form of art is one of the ways through which poets provide a nuanced impression of the world and reflect on how humans relate to it. Through the eyes of renowned poets such as Philip Larkin, societies have been able to reconnect with their past while at the same time attaining a sense of entertainment. It befits to not only focus on the composition itself but also its context, the composer, and other critical elements such as the tone which inform the motive of the artist to have a comprehensive understanding of the works of an artist. Based on this background, this essay encompasses the episodic life and works of Philip Larkin. At the close of the Second World War, Philip Larkin emerged as one of the leading poets in England. Having grown up in lonely and economically depressed life at the Coventry, Central England, most of Philip's literary writings have been founded on the sensitive post-war life. His extensive use of literary styles in most of his poetic works has drawn many interests in the world of literature. Even those who have not developed an interest in poetry get lured to his job because of this. This paper attempts to analyze the various poetic principles and styles used by Larkin to write his poems.

An Analysis of the Principles and Styles of Philip Larkin's writing

From a contextual point of view, it is a general perception that Philip Larkin's works are mostly viewed as a representative of the provincialism of the 20th century. Furthermore, his compositions

are also interpreted in various epics including of modernism, postmodernism, as well as post-colonialism. Between the years 1940 and 1950, Philip had evolved a poetic who was concerned with the establishment of consensus with the readers interested in his writings based on the shared experiences (Gregson 19).

Gregson also suggests that although Larkin takes measures to avoid modernist poetry carefully, he introduces it into a worldview of the English realist since he uses a conservative dialogue with modernism (Gregson 27). The use of a conversation his poetic writings insinuates a shared experience in the form of sharing each other's thoughts. It triggers the development of complex ideas and feelings that have been constructed as a result of two opposites interacting with one another. In the poem "The Whitsun Weddings", Larkin nods to Eliot and in the letter where he was giving instructions during a radio performance, Larkin indicates that "Success or failure of the poem depends on whether it gets off the ground on the last two lines" (Selected Letters 301). In the closure of this poem, it is evident that he chooses to use similes instead of metaphors.

These factors represent an almost visible sign of the presence of Bakhtinian heteroglossia in the poetry of Larkin. Also, the persona of "Coming" feels "like a child" is yet another plausible example even if the child's happiness is not shared. Also, in "The Trees" the poet states that they hear a faint message almost like something was being spoken (Collective Poems 166). This dialogue with his modernist and romantic predecessors is maintained all through despite the fact that the poet is suspected to be an anti-romantic and anti-modernist. It is because similes trigger a notion of continuity, of distinct entities, and are thus crucial in Larkin's poetry as is with metonymy, which is a figure he is frequently linked.

The same factors are noted in the attitude Larkin has towards his audience. Larkin indicated that his poems do not require any scholarly interpretation as they are straightforward. In doing so, he was not only trying to act as an anti-intellectual but was aiming towards developing a unique intimacy between him and his readers, while still respecting any present distinction and distance that separates them (Thwaite 212). His main ambition was to write a poem that could cover the space that is always present between the author and the readers. However, he also held on the possibility that the poem could be the actual barrier that he was trying to avoid. It is why he embraced the fact that writing valuable poetry needed special effort. In his review, he stated; "To me, now as at any other time, poetry should begin with emotion in the poet, and end with the same emotion in the reader. The poem is simply the instrument of transference" (Further Requirements 65). Therefore, the need to enable the reader to relive the situation from the poem is an aspect of Larkin's work that is accurately summarized in the commonly quoted work "Statement":

"I write poems to preserve things I have seen/thought/felt (if I may so indicate a composite and complex experience) both for myself and for others, though I feel that my prime responsibility is to

the experience itself, which I am trying to keep from oblivion for its sake. Why I should do this, I have no idea, but I think the impulse to preserve lies at the bottom of all art. (Required Writing 79)”

From this quote, the audience is left wondering, what he means by “experience?” It is a keyword from the declaration, but as noted by Watt’s concordance, he uses it only twice in two of his earliest poems: “After-Dinner Remarks” and “A Stone Church Damaged by a Bomb”. In the previous poem, he writes about his situation when he experienced emotion, and in the latter, it is all about rebuilding an experience. Both of these are vital principles in Larkin’s works (Tolley 112).

Considering these two poems and the “Statement”, it can be implied that Larkin means “shared experience” as evident in Gregson’s earlier phrase. However, this experience only becomes shared when the poet creates a text that the readers can read and relate. In one of his interviews, Larkin states that when creating a text, “you’re trying to preserve something. Not for you, but for the people who haven’t seen it or heard it or experienced it” (Required Writings 52). He is trying to state that the shared experience is not the main goal of his poetry, but instead, the poem itself is. When asked what it was he looked forward to preserving, Larkin stated that it was, “...the experience. The beauty” (Required Writings 68).

The primary meaning of beauty can be described as combined perfect features of form and charm that are appealing to the sight. The second definition further emphasized this by stating that it appeals to all other senses as well. Therefore, the reader gets to re-live this poet’s personal experience of beauty as something whose quality attracts keen pleasure. This is an aspect that is noticed in Larkin’s method of composition. Wordsworth also argues that a poet should be an individual who is speaking directly to others (937). This is a good representation of Larkin’s background with his anti-romantic tendencies.

In the criticism of Larkin, the fact that there is a struggle to preserve the values of poets and cultural conventions from the earlier times, and the contradicting need to rebel against them creates a dilemma. Penelope Pelizzon interprets this ambiguity by stating; “Evaluating Larkin’s work in relation to the carnivalesque demonstrates that his desire simultaneously to challenge and preserve social custom is a vital aspect of his complex, regenerative relation to ritual and tradition” (223). This suggestion is nothing but a fascinating and desperate attempt to consider Larkin’s work in the carnivalesque tradition but still creates more doubts. Despite the fact that there are Bakhtin terms which can be applied to Larkin’s work, such as heteroglossia and polyphony, the carnival remains unrepresented, and the carnivalesque is also not constructed (Vlad 103).

The Bakhtin category features not only death but also the rebirth. However, according to Larkin, death is mostly triumphant, which is why in the poem “Aubade”, he indicated that “Death is no different whined at than withstood” (Collective Poems 209). Also, in the common aphorism of “Dockery and Son” he warns the audience by stating that “Life is first boredom, then fear”

(Collective Poems 153). Laughter, which is the central element of carnivalesque literature, is not even referred. Death is highly regarded in the poems by Larkin; his protagonists are not mockers as would be expected in a real carnival.

Based on the illustrations, it befits to posit that one of Larkin's innovations is that he chooses to represent life from the death perspective, without the consideration of an afterlife or an alternative life that would be offered by the carnivalesque. Therefore, the argument made by Larkin that he is trying to preserve the experience for its beauty should not be assumed. He cannot seem to locate anything else beyond material existence, besides the "nothingness" that he suggests in most of his poems. This absence features transcendence and nostalgia for the pure spiritual values (Wain (b) 351). However, he is still far from achieving transcendentalism of the French symbolists and modernism.

The result of this was a series of attacks soon after his first volume *The Less Deceived* (1955) was published, as well as the anthology title *New Lines* (1956). For instance, in a review in 1957, Tomlinson (214) indicated;

"My own difficulty with his poetry is that, while I can see Mr. Larkin's achievement is, within its limits, a creditable one, I cannot escape from the feeling of its intense parochialism... Further, one can only deplore Mr. Larkin's refusal to note what had been done before 1890 in the ironic self-deprecating vein by Laforgue and Corbière and to take his bearings accordingly. But the modern Englishman is astonishingly provincial and Mr. Larkin (as he tells us) has 'no belief in "tradition"': 'I believe,' he writes in *Poets of the 1950s*, 'that every poem must be its own sole freshly-created universe.' And this forty years after 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'. (214)"

In the poem "Statement", there is a sentence which contains a provocative attack against Eliot:

"As a guiding principle I believe that every poem must be its own sole freshly created universe, and therefore have no belief in 'tradition' or a common myth-kitty or casual allusions in poems to other poems or poets, which last I find unpleasantly like the talk of literary understrappers letting you see they know the right people. (Required writings 79)"

It is important to take note of how Larkin puts the word "tradition" in quotes. This shows that he is not against the tradition itself. This would not make sense as he is clearly trying to preserve these values. However, what he is against is the cult of tradition and Eliot's inter-textuality principle. Moreover, it is evident that he also accepts some of the ideas presented by Eliot in his works. He could not locate anything unacceptable in the passage:

"[Tradition] cannot be inherited...It involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable to anyone who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year...."

This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity. (Eliot 22-23)”

Tradition is an important factor for Larkin, which is why he also views it as a constantly developing component of the present (Wain 171). Eliot and Larkin have completely different definitions of this term. In general, tradition can be described as the action of handing down features from one generation to the next. Larkin showcases an ambivalent attitude towards Eliot’s program of impersonality. He rejects the modernist principle that is best presented in the essay, “What happens is a continual surrender of him [the poet] as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality” (Eliot 25). Therefore, it goes against Larkin’s basic principles. Watt recalls that Larkin introduced a public reading for his works by stating that all of them were from his personal experience (“Scragged by embryo-Leavises” 174).

Although both participation and detachment determine the position Larkin constructs, what he includes in the poems are indeed his personal experience. According to Underhill (185), Larkin’s personae have been distanced from the individuals being observed without taking on a superior position. In his work, it is evident that keeping distance is the essential element of his composition method. In most cases, this experience is gained by an observer. Larkin, however, did not conceptualize this principle.

Although this poet had no systematic theory, it is evident that his work is directly opposite to that of Eliot. Eliot has based his works on the solid ground of his literary analysis. Eliot is an example of the modern intellectual poet who is focused on achieving excellence. In the scattered remarks he makes, he did not at one point refer to the rhetoric structure of the poem. This was not because he distanced himself from post-structuralist criticism, but because he did not consider the reader as a student. He conceives the poems as “instrument of transference” (Further Requirements 65). His position, therefore, is not similar to the modernists and neo-modernists in any way.

This is why Pritchard states that “Davie is on the side of those Americans, and the Englishman, Bunting, who share the ‘wholesome conviction’ ‘that a poem is a transaction between the poet and his subject more than it is a transaction between the poet and his reader’” (Pritchard 240). Davie and Bunting viewed the ideal reader as someone who overhears what is going on. Larkin, on the other hand, is a poet who has every intention of sharing his private experiences with his audience.

Larkin brings this factor in two stages of composition. First, he makes the idea of bringing the gift to his readers during a radio program where he stated;

“You try to create something in a word that will reproduce in somebody else who never met you and perhaps isn’t even living in the same cultural society as yourself that somebody else will read and so get the experience that you had and that forced you to write the poem. It’s a kind of preservation by re-creation if I can put it that way. (Further Requirements 106)”

In another instance, he analyzes his own composition methods as a process involving two stages;

“The poet should possess a feeling that you are the only one to have noticed something, something especially beautiful or sad or significant. Then, there follows a sense of responsibility, responsibility for preserving this remarkable thing using a verbal device that will set off the same experience, so that they too will feel How beautiful, how significant, how sad, and the experience will be preserved. (Further Requirements 78)”

He insinuates that for an experience to be preserved, the reader must be present as he or she is the medium where it comes back to life. This takes place when they read and relive an experience that the poet experienced. Therefore, the audience of Larkin is active readers and not passive readers (Timms 78). In Larkin’s two stages; experiencing something and putting it into words is considered. In his later works such as “The Pleasure Principle,” Larkin argues that the second stage is all about finding the adequate verbal devices. This is because he feels like experience is non-verbal.

CONCLUSION

It is a general perception that Philip Larkin’s works are mostly viewed as a representative of the provincialism of the 20th century. Furthermore, his compositions are also interpreted in various contexts including modernism, postmodernism, as well as post-colonialism. The poet had evolved a poetic who was concerned with the establishment of consensus with the readers interested in his writings based on the shared experiences between the years 1940 and 1950. It is evident that Larkin’s principles and style of writing are influenced mainly by his experience and the need to preserve it. This is what shapes his decisions on when and how to employ his poetic language and styles. He also attempts to showcase the reasons why he is against specific factors of tradition, which is the case when features are passed down through generations. Although many authors are against his approach, Larkin has managed to create poems that are appealing to readers due to the ease of understanding and the opportunity of relating to the context.

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