

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol.1.Issue.4.,2014

**THOSE BAFFLING ABSENCES: NIHILISM IN THE POETRY OF PHILIP LARKIN
(REMEMBERING THE POET ON HIS 29TH YEAR OF DEMISE)**

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Article Received : 25/11/2014
Article Revised:05/12/2014
Article Accepted:07/11/2014

ABSTRACT

One of the most discussed and debated poets of the Movement, Philip Larkin perhaps deserves to be given a special mention on his 29th year of demise. '*Deprivation is for me what daffodils were for Wordsworth*', he had stated while elaborating on the theme of nihilism in his last major collection of poems *The Whitsun Weddings*. Larkin's typically ambivalent themes were never rated too highly in his time, being overpowered by those of Ted Hughes and Thom Gunn. In fact he was accused of being drably circumspect and commonplace, due to his compulsive preoccupation with deprivation and death. His early poems reveal the influence of his predecessors W. H. Auden, W.B. Yeats and Thomas Hardy, clearly perceptible in the highly structured yet flexible verse of *The North Ship*. This paper attempts to highlight the aspect of nihilism which is considered a prominent feature of the bulk of Larkin's poetry.

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Every serious reader or critic of Philip Larkin has been quick to notice the recurring themes in his poetry: the unbridgeable gap between human hopes and reality, the constant awareness of old age and death, the corrosive effects of time, the insubstantiality of love, the tedium of modern mechanical life and the emptiness of religious beliefs. Moreover, all criticism following the publication of Larkin's works have highlighted these aspects with immense clarity and accuracy, with only one major difference. While some of his critics like Clive James and Philip Gardner list these persistent themes as Larkin's uniqueness and strength, others like Colin Falck condemn them as products of his inherent pessimism and quality of self denial and effacement. Larkin admits this himself when, in an interview with *The Observer* (1979), he remarked that "it is unhappiness that provokes a poem.....it's very difficult to write about being happy—very easy to write about being miserable".

One of the persistent aims of Larkin's poetry is to "jolt men out of their bad habits of expectancy". Man's incurable optimism seems to him both strange and frustrating: undaunted by disappointments, he continues to hope that the rich argosies of life will heap priceless gifts on him. The experiences of disillusionment do little to stop him from dreaming of a rosy future—"something is always approaching" (**Next, Please**). However, what reality has to offer is something quite different: frustration, bitterness, suffering, death. Take **Wires**, for example. The old cattle in the field surrounded by an electric fence know better than the energetic, younger ones that attempting to cross it is both dangerous and futile. The metaphor suggests

that the 'newcomers' in the journey of life rebel against the stifling boundaries of life only to meet with "muscle-shredding violence". **The Whitsun Weddings**, on the other hand is an almost conscious exercise at abolishing the sense of self, which is subsumed into the landscape. A similar theme is exploited in **Arrivals, Departures**, by means of an extensive metaphor connected with ships.

The dread of old age and death finds powerful expression in **The Old Fools**.

At death, you break up: the bits that were you

Start speeding away from each other forever

With no one to see....

Even the budding of leaves on trees is a mere illusion.

Their yearly trick of looking new

Is written down in rings of grain.

Life has nothing to offer but boredom and fear. The end of age appears bleakest in **Next, Please**. The 'black-sailed ship of death' is ready to whisk man away into the dreadful world of "a huge and birdless silence". Even the cheerful stanzas of Poem 1 (To Bruce Montgomery) in **The North Ship** that are a youthful celebration of spring, love and resurrection, seem to beguile us, as in the refrain: '...a drum taps, a wintry drum...' Behind all scenes of joy, colour and activity there lies an awareness of the passage of time and the inevitability of death. It is time that eats into the life of man, heedless of his youth and vitality.

Time is the echo of an axe

Within a wood. (Poem XXVI, The North Ship)

Just as an axe cuts unfeelingly into the wood and brings down the 'unresting castles', Time eats into man's existence, cruelly castrating his youth and happiness. Whatever be his approach to life—whether of active participation or passive suffering, he is a victim of Time's 'eroding genius', making every hope and dream appear meaningless. "There is a double cruelty in Time; it at once reminds us of what we might have had, and turns what we do have into a sense of disappointment". (P. R. King, *Nine Contemporary Poets: A Critical Introduction*.)

Larkin here almost seems to attest Hardy's dictum, "If way to the Better they be, it exacts a full look at the Worst". Of course though not as severe as Hardy, Larkin too seems to be suggesting the validity of the motto, "be less deceived".

A similar disappointment awaits man in love too. 'Faith Healing' spells out his cynicism clearly:

...in every one 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.

Life in the present day world, spells unrelieved boredom—an agglomeration of missed alternatives, lost opportunities as well as the seemingly endless pressures of social commitment. In a poem like **Triple Time**, he assumes without argument or evidence that the present is 'colorless and empty, a time unrecommended by event', in which no meaningful occurrence may be anticipated to add significance to the humdrum of daily existence. An allied theme which seems to haunt Larkin is the nature of human identity, of his divided self and separateness. He explores this major issue in often raw and painful imagery. Though his is essentially a poetry of isolation, he is equally conscious of being watched as he himself watches.

Larkin's bold skepticism regarding the efficacy of religion to solve man's problems, actually affirms his immense belief in human resilience. In **Church Going**, he exhorts men into cultivating self reliance. The poem describes a strictly secular faith; his speculations about what churches will become when they fall 'completely' rather than partially 'out of use', leads him to conclude that "the fear of death and the loss of religious belief are counteracted by an ineradicable faith in human and individual potential". (Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin*) Religion neither affords consolation nor provides refuge to man, in utter contrast to what it proclaims.

His view of life, however, cannot be said to be one of unrelieved pessimism. 'The Whitsun Weddings', for instance, with its delightful descriptions of landscapes and men, projects him partaking of the merry

Whitsunday atmosphere of unalloyed gaiety, while yet remaining an onlooker, very much outside the orbit of the whole experience. **Wild Oats** is a hilarious poem in which he looks back on his 'green' days with an air of light hearted nostalgia. The girl he met,

A bosomy English rose

And her friend I could talk to...

Seven years, and four hundred letters later, they agree to part because he was just too bored to love. Even **The Tree** which talks of ageing and mortality ends on a note of hope:

Last year is dead, they seem to say,

Begin afresh, afresh, afresh.

Thoreau's statement that "the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation" was an indictment of life of the crass, commercialized, nineteenth century European society. "The labours of Hercules", Thoreau states, "were trifling in comparison with those which my neighbours have undertaken; for they were only twelve and had an end. But I could never see that these men slew or captured any monster or finished any labour". Man is a puny individual who consciously overburdens himself with work, in his ambition for a better life, inviting total misery. The only way out of such a sordid existence is to live in complete harmony with Nature. Larkin, for whom "life is an affair of solitude diversified by company rather than an affair of company diversified by solitude" (Interview with **The Observer**, 1979), this too was not a lasting remedy. The irony of man being born free, but being incapable of exercising individual choice, results in that persistent sense of existential isolation that haunts him from cradle to grave. His mind gradually gets schooled to the belief his very existence is questionable. The keynote of existentialism, in fact, focuses on the view of man being 'an isolated creature who is cast ignominiously into an alien universe which possesses no truth, value or meaning' and to represent man's life as it moves from the nothingness from where it came towards the nothingness where it must end, an existence both anguished and absurd. (M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*). The dichotomy between a rather blurred realization of the existence of something beyond the physical and the inability to perceive it constitutes the essential dilemma of Larkin as revealed through his poems. However, the ultimate aim of his poems seems to be to prick the rainbow coloured bubble of illusion and make men see life in its nakedness; and to give them, in his own words, "a certain amount of sad-eyed realism". (Letter to George Hartley, April 1955. Larkin at Sixty, ed Anthony Thwaite.)

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