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INTERROGATING "THE MOVEMENT" CREDO IN PHILIP LARKIN'S MAJOR POETRY.

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ABSTRACT

Philip Larkin is generally known as a Movement poet. The term 'Movement' was attached to a particular group of poets and writers of whom Larkin was the most prominent figure in maintaining the characteristics of them. He himself was very much conscious about the strict norms of their group. His poetry was very much rational and realistic without high flown Romanticism or the symbolist approach of the Modern writing. Thus, through his colloquial language and simple writing he reached the core of the heart of common people of the post Second World War England. But at the same time he was seen to deviate from the strict Movement credo even in his major poetry. A perceptive critical analysis would suffice to focus on the matter.

KEYWORDS : Movement, strictness, deviation, categorization

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Philip Arthur Larkin (1922-1985) is a poet belonging to the post Second World War period when the entire Europe was under the threat of disillusionment, despair, faithlessness, disappointment, boredom, disintegration and fragmentation. There was a lack of stable structure both in the society and in the field of poetry. During this period a group of poets and writers became the prominent figures with an almost same attitude in dealing with the literary works. Their movement ultimately came to be known as The Movement. Along with Larkin, this group included Kingsley Amis, Donald Davie, D.J. Enright, John Wain, Thom Gunn and Robert Conquest. The basic motto of these poets and writers was to reconstruct and to 'build', a new poetic coupled with so many likes and dislikes in the field of literary works, which would be discussed in detail shortly. However, that Larkin is known as a Movement poet is quite clear from some critical evaluation. Blake Morrison is of the opinion that "Larkin is by far and away the group's finest poet".(284). Another critic A. Alvarez is more critical in his approach. To him, Larkin's poetry consists of "everything that was best in the Movement and at the same time shows what was lacking" (99). But, this paper proposes to show how Larkin has deviated from the strict mottoes of their group and even from his own view point about writing poetry in the post 1950s British scenario. To begin with, some basic tenets, which are generally considered as the distinguishing features of the Movement writings should be highlighted.

About the emergence of The Movement, many critics and historicists have made noteworthy statements of which Andrew Swarbrick's opinion is that "There was never a deliberately organized 'school' of poets armed with manifestos"(69) as the Movement. But the writings of the group "began appearing together in journals and anthologies of that time, and literary journalists and critics were quick to discern similarities between them"(69). Thus, their altogether efforts come to be distinguishable from their predecessors' work and their movement attains the name 'The Movement'. About the distinctive features of the Movement writings, Ronald Carter and John McRae have rightly pointed out that their 'aim' was to 'rid poetry of high-flown Romanticism and bring it down to earth' which "can be seen to have been realized in the work (most notably) of Philip Larkin ..." and "Their work deliberately contrasted both with the high emotion and verbal effusion of Dylan Thomas and with the Modernist tradition of T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound" (438). Not only that, for detailed analysis one should keep in mind what Sisir Kumar Chatterjee has beautifully pointed out about the Movement tenets:

"building a poem around a rational structure, the use of colloquial frequently defensive asides, hesitation and qualifications a resorting to a pose of embarrassed awkwardness, intellectual wit, an impatience with neoromantic excess and a fidelity to formal framework"(7).

In this way, a step by step analysis of different critics' opinions would clarify the Movement features more prominently. Moreover, the virtues for which the Movement poetry becomes conspicuous are, as observed by Andrew Swarbrick, "virtues of good prose: reason, common experience a sense of shared community, moderation above all, poetry conceived of as statement rather than mystery" (74). Thus, the basic common features of a Movement poem are explained by the critics. But when any one of the poets or writers says about their mottoes of writing himself, everything of the earlier analysis seems to us as less significant. Larkin himself has explained his intention, aim, concern and preoccupations of writing poetry:

I write poems to preserve things I have  
seen/thought felt ... both for myself and  
for others ... my prime responsibility is  
to the experience itself ... I believe that  
every poem must be in its own soul freshly  
created universe ... have no belief in  
'tradition' or a common myth-kitty or  
casual allusions to other poems or poets ..." (179).

Thus, it is seen that Larkin has a detestation to Romantic sensibilities, Modernist obscurities, allusions, myths and also to what is not one's own ideas or thoughts. What he means to suggest is plainly that a poet should be 'original' in his writing and he should write about what he has had experience and the language of writing should be colloquial without any myth and allusion so that a very common and ordinary person can understand the written document. In a word, he wanted to reach the heart of every common people of the post war Europe.

Yet, a perceptive critical analysis of the poems "An Arundel Tomb", "Ambulances," "The Whitsun Weddings", "Nothing to be Said" from the Collection *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964). and "The Explosion" and "High Windows" from the collection *High Windows* (1974) would suffice to point out the loopholes in Larkin as a Movement poet. He is seen to deal with some myths, allusions while dealing with some poems. Again sometimes like a Romantic poet, he deals with some imaginative aspects presenting his emotional subject matter with the help of symbols in a very lyrical language without maintaining the strict structure and syntactical pattern and rational order.

Larkin, in spite of being categorized as a Movement poet is seen to deal with some myths in the poem "An Arundel Tomb". In this poem while talking about the plainness of the sculpture he points out the age of its embodiment thus:

Such plainness of the pre-baroque  
Hardly involves the eye... (Stanza-2)

That means, the sculpture described in the poem was made long before (about 500 years) the decorative and extensively ornamented baroque style which spread throughout Europe from the late sixteenth to the early eighteenth century. Thus, Larkin has made a reliable reference to describe the simplistic structure of the statuary and to situate it in a particular point of time. Again, in the same poem, Larkin makes a slight reference to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* when he makes a detail description of the statuary. He writes that there are two dogs sculptured under the feet of the earl and the countess though actually in the sculpture there were a lion and a dog under the feet of the earl and the countess respectively. His slight change and talking about only dogs reminds us of the image of "still stoned dogs" described in the stories of *Metamorphosis*. Not only that in his "Ambulances" Larkin makes a brilliant presentation of the movement of the ambulances which becomes almost palpable to our eyes. But a perceptive reader would easily find out something mythical in Larkin's dealing with the movement of the ambulances that the ambulances arrive, halt, pick up somebody and then depart. Such activities are very common in most of the mythical stories. In Greek myths, we find the similar event in a different term when Pluto comes with a carriage and abducts Proserpine. Thus, Larkin can be seen as a poet dealing with some mythical themes in his poems. Again, in his "The Whitsun Weddings", in the last stanza another mythical figure comes to the fore with the reference to the image of "arrow-shower" At the end of his train journey when the poet reaches the station and the train stops crowded with many newly married couples, a "sense of falling" is felt by him, which is compared to "an arrow shower". In Roman mythology Cupid, the god of love always carries a bow and arrow, and in the present context of the poem Cupid can be easily evoked as it is the occasion of marriage and the first time of consumption for the couples. In this way it can be said that, Larkin to whom inclusion of myth demands a lot of academic expertness from the part of readers for understanding, cannot come out from being trapped by the ideas and concepts of myths.

Sometimes Larkin is seen to use such kind of language which directly or indirectly alludes to Modern poet like T.S. Eliot or the Modern novelist like D.H. Lawrence or the late Victorian novelist like Thomas Hardy. In Larkin's "Ambulances" When the people see the receding movement of the ambulance, they are seen to whisper together. In Eliot's "The Hollow Men" we find one line in the first section saying:

...We whisper together

...

Thus, an alert reader can easily point out the allusions used by Larkin whether consciously or unconsciously. Again Larkin's "The Explosion" is presented with such kind of narrative style and theme that it immediately proposes to provide with the taste of reading Lawrence's colliery novel like *Sons and Lovers* where the lifestyle of the coal-miners are captured with a sense of distress and pathos. Not only that in the last stanza of "The Whitsun Weddings" Larkin explicitly alludes to Hardy's tragic vision of life when he says:

...and it was nearly done, this trail

Travelling coincidence....

This is a clear echo of Hardy's philosophy that life is full of "mischance" and "coincidence". Larkin's dealing with the thought of marriage in life is like a coincidence as that of the train journey. Thus, Larkin alludes to so many phrases, ideas, themes to his predecessors which do not fit to a Movement poet. Therefore, Larkin cannot be called a poet totally 'original'. This presence of allusions in Larkin's poems shows his deviation from the strict norms of the Movement.

What is perceived is that the movement poets and writers are antagonistic to Romantic sensibilities in their approach to literature. This paper also discussed this issue that they presented only those thoughts and issues which they had experienced. But a good reader would be astonished at how Larkin, being the "group's first poet" has dealt with so many Romantic sensibilities in his poems. Like a true Romantic poet Larkin sometimes becomes imaginative. The first stanza of his "High Windows" highlights how highly imaginative Larkin is in his writing:

When I see a couple of kids

And guess he's fucking her and she's

Taking pills or wearing a diaphragm,

I know this is paradise

Here the poet is so imaginative that he loses his reason. He can 'guess' the sexual intercourse just seeing a "couple of kids". Not only that even he goes further thinking about her "taking pills" or "wearing diaphragm" so as to prevent from being pregnant. It can be said that Larkin here surpasses the Romantic poets in dealing with his imaginative faculty while writing poems. Because he firmly asserts ("I know this...") about what he guesses. Even the notion of 'paradise' is very much imaginative. In another poem "An Arundel Tomb" there we find a series of instances purely enveloped with imagination. To speak about the sculptor of the statuary Larkin imagines that perhaps any ordinary sculptor may have deliberately tried to draw the attention of the passers-by engraving their "Latin names around the base". It is Larkin's deliberate assumption and imagination about all these things about which Larkin did not have any firsthand experience or direct knowledge because it was made in the "pre-baroque" age. In the next stanza Larkin once again becomes imaginative like a representative of the Romantic poets:

They would not guess how early in  
Their supine stationary voyage  
The air would change to soundless damage,

Here Larkin means to suggest that though the statues are still in their supine inactive stage, they are on the 'voyage' of time. And, thus, the destructive power of the blowing of wind destroys the earlier shining state of the statues and also the air of time would destroy the human civilization silently. The entire process of passing through a passage of time which would ultimately bring about the soundless silent damage to every material object, is apprehended by Larkin imaginatively. Even the last line of his poem "The Whitsun Weddings" also bristles with imaginative exercise where Larkin in his fantasy can visualize an "arrow-shower" "somewhere becoming rain". He in his ecstatic mood, like a true Romantic poet sees the epiphanic vision of fertility coming through rain. This total event is not visible by the poet's earthly eyes ("sent out of sight") and, yet he says, "somewhere becoming rain". Thus, for so many times Larkin seems to the readers as a Romantic poet having high imaginative faculty. Because during his journey to London from Hull which has been described in this very poem, he imaginatively divides London city into its postal districts like small "squares of wheat". Thus, Larkin cherishes much more imagination like a Romantic poet in his writing. Rightly do Carter and McRae say that Larkin "appears to be simultaneously a Romantic poet who is distrustful of certain aspects of Romanticism"(440).

It would be an incomplete attempt if the discussion remains limited to one single Romantic sensibility found in Larkin's work. Apart from imaginative element, Larkin's poetry also shows the presence of lyrical language, melancholic tone and an emotional subjective attachment of the poet himself. Therefore, a sensitive reader would not have to toil much to find out the lyrical language beautifully presented in the fifth stanza of Larkin's "An Arundel Tomb":

..... Rigidly they  
Persisted, linked, through lengths and breadth  
Of time, Snow fell, undated. Light  
Each summer thronged the glass. A bright  
Litter of birdcalls strewed the same  
Bone-riddled ground...

When any reader goes through such passages, he becomes, for a few moments unaware of the presence of harshness of reality and the strictness of language generally dealt with by the same poet. Such kind of lyrical language makes the readers forget about the harsh reality that death is the final and unavoidable event of human life. In this way Larkin's poems become more Romantic than realistic. In another poem — "Nothing to be said" some Romantic features are prominent. The tone of the poem is melancholic. Not only that the speaker becomes mournful at the very notion of the inevitability of death in human life. At the end of the poem the speaker (poet) points out the indifferent inactive attitude of the people in spite of knowing the fact that "life is slow dying" (stanza 1). A perceptive reader can promptly pinpoint that the poet himself wishes to do something and to say something in such a situation thereby being emotionally attached

to the thought of death. Thus, Larkin once again deviates from the strict norms of the Movement poets whose focus is to present a controlled emotion if it comes at all in their poetry. To speak more about the deviations it should also be pointed out that sometimes

Larkin is seen to develop his poem without maintaining a proper order while dealing with his themes. In his "High Windows" one would be wonder struck when he comes to the last stanza. The first four stanzas talk about the poet's comments and assumption on the moral corruption of the young generation of the post-war European society. But suddenly in the final stanza, the poet shifts from the mundane thought to an elevated exalted one. The poem gets an immediate and sudden rise from a very realistic mode to a more symbolic, sublime one. Not only that, this symbolic language is presented not in a straightforward way, but in an obscure manner. This stanza may not be easily intelligible to the common reader:

Rather than words comes the thought of high windows:

The sun-comprehending glass.

And beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows

Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless.

Again, one perceptive reader can also find out the escapist mode of the poet. Because after talking much about the immorality in the society, the poet becomes tired and then to get an escape he ponders on the thought of high windows which is highly poetic as well as symbolic. Thus, Larkin in spite of being attested with the norms and distinctive features of the Movement poet, is perceived as a Romantic poet; to speak more he becomes, to some extent, like that of Keats in his Romantic temperament as is observed by John Bayley. Bayley says that "Larkin by temperament is a straightforward romantic of the older school that includes both Houseman and Keats ...", because his poetry "takes us straight back to the simplest and most poignant romantic themes" (65). Again to make this point stronger, what Clive James and Christopher Ricks have pointed out needs mentioning. While James describes Larkin's poetic personality as "A romantic sensibility classically disciplined" (108), Ricks says that "Larkin combines ... the understandings both of classicism and of romanticism" and that "though Larkin's convictions are classical, his impulses are romantic" (276).

Some Modernist elements are also found in the poems by Larkin. The poet in his "Ambulances" like a Modern poet philosophizes on human life saying that everything is solved after death and after death there remains nothing:

And sense the solving emptiness

That lies just under all we do,

And for a second get it whole,

So, permanent and blank and true.

Here, Larkin seems to the reader very much like the existentialist philosophers Jean-Paul. Sartre and Albert Camus to whom, as M.H. Abrams observed:

"to view a human being as an isolated existent..., to conceive the human world as possessing no inherent truth, value or meaning, and to represent human life — in its fruitless search for purpose and significance, as it moves from the nothingness whence it came toward the nothingness where it must end..." (1)

Thus, Larkin steps aside from the restricted Movement features being modernist in his approach to life. That Larkin was influenced and infected by the existentialist philosophy is revealed through such kind of perception presented in the poem. Again in another poem "An Arundel Tomb" like a Modern poet, to address the post-war situation, Larkin points out the hollowness of the age. To talk about the un-appreciation and negligence of the people or the contemporary society to the old statues, Larkin says

Now, helpless in the hollow of

An Un-armorial age,...

Thus, Larkin cannot come out from being infected by the nihilistic philosophy propagated by his earlier predecessors. In another poem "Nothing To be Said" there are so many images highlighting the fragmented, alienated, disjointed society as we find in the modern poems. Not only that, in the same poem the phrase "dark mornings" which he uses to mean the present time, at first sight seems obscure and strange to a common

reader, and it also reaches the height of a modern image which has multilayered meanings. Thus, in Larkin's poems so many images and symbols can be found which provide with the same flavour as that of modern ones. For this, we should point out the attempt of Andrew Motion who "seeks to establish his (Larkin's) largely ignored adaption of symbolist and therefore, by association modernist — strategies" (17).

Last but not the least focus of this paper goes to the structural inadequacies found in Larkin's poetry. Larkin is well known also for a stable rational and regular structure in his poems. But even a very common and ordinary reader can chalk out one gross instance of his (Larkin's.) lackadaisical attitude in building up a poem with a regular stanzaic pattern. After eight consecutive stanzas of triplet, in "The Explosion" suddenly and abruptly the poem ends with a single line, "One showing the eggs unbroken". Whatever be the connotative and symbolic significance, this stanzaic structural pattern becomes incongruous in comparison to the other stable, regular, rational structure of the poems by the same poet.

So, this paper concludes with the message that Larkin cannot be categorized as a strict Movement poet as per the norms of the particular group or as is asserted by the poet himself. One should keep in mind that no poet for rather no artist should be confined within a strict paradigm of definite rules and norms. A poet should always be judged as only a poet without attesting any kind of strict epithet for a separate categorization. Therefore, Larkin should not be called only a strict Movement poet; rather he should be judged with a more extended critical evaluation because he is, after all, a good artist.

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