

Disillusionment in the Poetry of Philip Larkin with Special Reference to his *At Grass, Vers de Societe, Wants, Going, High Windows and Lines On a Young Lady's Photograph Album*

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Abstract: Philip Larkin was one of the poets who believed to be intimately related to The Movement. The poets of The Movement believed to have rebelled against the inflated romanticism of the nineteen thirties and nineteen-forties. The Movement was surely not a well-organized group of poets with a clear and consistent programme of ideas. But this group did have a shared set of values and assumptions closely related to the moods and conditions of Post-War England. Larkin has a profound sensitive and complex response to the muddle and the drama of ordinary, everyday human life. He adopted a poetic stance focussing closely and persistently on the mundane and on the relentless and sometimes disillusionment of existence. This response includes both an affirmation that life is worth living and a stubborn refusal to be deceived in their perceptions of reality. So the present paper is an attempt to study disillusionment in Larkin's selected poetry at three levels – the emotional, social and political.

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Philip Larkin is considered to be the central figure of the group known as "The Movement". Larkin made his debut on the literary scene in the mid-fifties with his first collection of poems entitled *The North Ship* (1945). It was followed by *The Less Deceived* (1955), *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964) and *High Windows* (1974). The common assumption is that "The Movement" was largely "a reaction against the inflated Romanticism of the 1940's, a victory of common sense and clarity over obscurity and mystification, of verbal restraint over stylistic excess: in short, the virtues of Philip Larkin over those of Dylan Thomas." (Regan,13) If "The Movement" was literary background, its social context was post-war Britain with all its agonies, anxieties, insecurities as a sequel of the catastrophe in the form of World War-II. Disillusion as the *Collin's English Language Dictionary* means "freedom from illusion" and illusion is something opposed to reality. Hence disillusionment paves the way to reality. Disillusionment is the disappointment that one feels when one discovers that something is not as good as it was expected to be. All arts including literature, implicitly or explicitly, have ever been centred around human life.

The poets are more sensitive than ordinary men and the very essence of poetry lies in imagination. But, at the same time, the artist is a part of society and cannot ignore the stark realities of life. This contrast between “to be” and “is”, between “Romanticism” and “realism”, is the root cause of disillusionment. The present paper is an attempt to study disillusionment in Larkin's poetry at three levels – the emotional, social and political. Before being a social and worldly unit, the poet is an individual. First of all, an individual should be considered as an individual *per se*. As an individual, the poet is a living, feeling and pulsating identity. His individual psyche can be traced in what is called personal or the “inner life”. This life within life constitutes the thoughts, feelings, sensations, hopes, fears, fears, desires and attitudes. Larkin's emotional disillusionment becomes apparent in his nihilistic attitude towards modern culture which is symbolic of psychological pressures on the individual. The portrayal of abysmal landscape is symbolic of his disintegrated self, modern sensibility or a troubled post-war agnostic sensibility in a particular phase of the 20th century. His disdain of reality and desire of oblivion in “Wants” (Larkin,42) and sense of senselessness in “Going” (Larkin,3) underline his lack of vision. “Wants” depicts pessimistic outlook of life and is a rare combination of subjective and objective elements in poetry. The speaker seems in a mood of self-effacement. His contempt for sex and familial emotions, both in “Wants” and “High Windows”(Larkin. 165), is implicitly personal and they clearly point to Larkin's masochistic tendencies. The urge of the aching self to seek an escape from the sordid and grotesque world of reality proves futile as death in itself appears “silken” (p. 3) only at a distance. The poem “Going” almost a kind of rejoinder to “Wants,” is about death, an idea most clear to Larkin. Evening is a metaphor of death as evening (end) of life (day) but it lights no lamp, nor does it bring comfort to his soul though it seems silken at a distance. It is no more than a passive acceptance of the world of Robert Frost's “The Onset” where Larkin:

...almost stumble[s] looking up and round, | As one who overtaken by
the end | Gives up his | errand, and lets death descend | Upon him where
he is, with nothing done. (Frost,184)

If “Wants” represents the existential dilemma of modern man, “Going” is a rejoinder to it. Both these poems clearly point towards an idea of escape from the harsh reality into the golden world of imagination. The poet presents the speaker as a hopeless drifter because neither he can face the existential crisis, nor does he find comfort in escape. Failure of perception of the “load” (p. 3) that makes him unconscious leaves the quest for freedom unfulfilled while the failure of vision indicates the emotional lapse on his part. They, in turn, become the fundamental reasons for his

emotional disenchantment. The poem "High Windows" too, is an ironic tribute to sex (passions). However, as houses in "At Grass" symbolize physical at one level and mental states of the poet on the other, are bridled. Larkin, as a "hopeless ... inflexible pessimist," (Morton, 59) nowhere seems to affirm life as to provide solution to its problems. Disillusionment at the social plane becomes manifest in a sense of resentment at the limitation of contemporary social experience and a spirit of rebellion and futility that fails to find comfort in society and its values. In "High Windows", the poet contrasts the present society (generation) with that of the previous one and presents a panoramic sweep. He shows as to how the present generation has taken liberties with social taboos, conventions and freedom in sexual matters which the older generation had only "dreamed/all their lives" (165). All "bonds" and "gestures" (165) are discarded like an outdated machine, poetically suggested by the old harvester that has been replaced by an improvised one. However, in the last stanza is made a shift from social reality to the thoughts of high windows beyond which is "... the deep blue air, that shows/nothing, and is nowhere and is endless" (165). In "Vers de Societe"⁸ the poet's anguished soul's journey from a robust condemnation of empty social order to vague social chatter and virtue of togetherness is akin to the sensibility of modern man who finds no comfort in anything. Religion and rituals do not seem to provide solace as the speaker regards the activity of church-going as "something that bores" (181) and the idea of God is discarded as one "who's gone too" (181). Even the nature fails to embalm the anguished soul. Moon, that is generally associated with soothing coolness, appears thinned to the point of a "sharpened blade" (181) and the wind sounds "noisy" (181) to the poet. All these images suggest the lack of rhythm in life. They underline Larkin's conception of England as ideal of tradition and duty "that persists alongside an increasing dismay at the ravages of consumerism" (Regan, 79) that proved to be an illusory notion. Larkin's disillusionment at the political level can be traced in his poems like "At Grass" and "Lines On a Young Lady's Photograph Album" where time and again he regrets past in an almost elegiac mood. To emphasize, it an ironic vein is used in them. "At Grass" is a poem about horses. One of the horses is eating grass while the other one is standing "anonymous" (29) and seems to look on the first one. The poem recollects how fifteen years ago these horses were the centre of attraction and formed elements of fables and press columns. The images of parasols, squadrons of cars and cries emphasize the excitement gathered around them in the past. But gone are the crowd and cries that the "eye can hardly pick them out" (29). Larkin endows these animals with capacity of retrospection that is especially human and asks "Do memories plague their ears like flies?" (29). Also, the horses

in “At Grass” symbolize lost heroism and lost social order wherein “fifteen years ago” (29) is a clear indication of the time of greatness assured just before the outbreak of crisis in the form of World War-II. Blake Morrison rightly claims that “by allowing horses to symbolize loss of power, Larkin manages to tap nostalgia for a past glory that was England.”¹¹ British Empire was converted into a Welfare State – a marked decline from a glorious, heroic past into a mediocre present where the promise of a world fit to live in proved an illusion as the word “bridles” (30) in the closing line appropriately suggests the notion of a welfare state rather than that of an ideal freedom. “Lines On a Young Lady's Photograph Album” too, records Larkin's disenchantment which manifests itself in melancholic and elegiac lyricism of the poem that, according to Alun Jones, “helps us to understand Larkin's 'sad-eyed' realism.”¹² The speaker goes through a photo-album of a young lady and feels contracted at heart and left “to mourn” (72) a past that “no one now can share” (72). He considers photography a faithful art, which does not censor blemishes and depicts things as they really are. But photography, a mere synonym of reality, is in itself disappointing in the extreme and the poet exclaims: “But O, photography! as no art is/Faithful and disappointing!” (71). The main thrust of all the poems discussed above is that the failure, projected by Larkin in his poetry, is not merely of a single event, person or emotion but the failure of human life as such. In them is projected the image of post-War England where “rest can never dwell, hope never comes/that comes to all but torture without end.”¹³ Larkin is representative of the welfare statesmen who ironically contemplate past in search of the values that man can live by. To them, the present seems only the “irreversible recession of all innocence, worth and sweetness from human life”¹⁴ and future nothing more than a “process death.”¹⁵ The quest remains unfulfilled and Larkin can only try to rationalize:

Life is first boredom, then fear
Whether or not we use it, it goes,
And leaves... something hidden from us...
...and then the ... end of age. (Larkin, 152).

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