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**Is There Any Passing Gleam of Sunshine in
Philip Larkin's Poems?***

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Abstract

In the modern period after the forties, a group of nine poets wrote a genuine and healthy poetry that belonged definitely to a new period. They were Elizabeth Jennings, John Holloway, Philip Larkin, Thomas Gunn, Kingsly Amis, D. J. Enright, John Wain and others. They were called the Movement Poetry. Their poetry was intelligent, knowledgeable and polished. The poetry from these individuals also tended to reflect everyday life, with a newfound emphasis on clarity, democratic values, religious decline and intellectual detachment.

Larkin's complaint against life is that it has never lured him. Its very indifference and its failure to have any use for him make him want to reject it. This doesn't mean that his mind is wholly a mind to winter; gleam of light is there, some flicker of life, a wish for a moment of frolic out of doors. Alongside poems of the most intense gloom and alarm, Larkin also develops the affirmative features of his talent.

Key Words: Movement Poetry, detachment, religious decline, gleam of sunshine.

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In the modern period after the forties, a group of nine poets wrote a genuine and healthy poetry that belonged definitely to a new period. They were Elizabeth Jennings, John Holloway, Philip Larkin, Thomas Gunn, Kingsly Amis, D. J. Enright, John Wain and others. They were called the Movement Poetry. Their poetry was intelligent, knowledgeable and polished. The poetry from these individuals also tended to reflect everyday life, with a newfound emphasis on clarity, democratic values, religious decline and intellectual detachment. If one intends to distinguish this poetry to the fifties from its predecessors, the most important general point would be that it submits to no great systems of theoretical constructs of unconscious commands. It is free from both mystical and logical compulsions and is empirical in its attitude to all that comes.

Philip Larkin, the chief supporter of the Movement poetry, is seen as the most eminent voice of a new generation. The virtues of his poetry are clarity and elegance. He has a reliable instinct for elderly arrangement and a respect for formal perfection. He makes the most of his gifts and has an accurate sense of his limitation. His skillful craftsmanship enables him to build up a firm structure in his poems and to portray the realistic details of the contemporary scene in language that has a recognizable rhythm and a consistent polish. His skill and feeling are immediately acknowledged to be a note of too much caution and timidity in confronting life. Various kinds of defeat certainly run through his poetry, but there is also recognition of beauty and praise of certain moral qualities above all beliefs. Larkin's representation of modern England concentrates on unhappy and unremarkable aspect of the industrial landscape.

A study of Larkin's poetry confirms that his poetry is "an affair of sanity, of seeing things as they are".¹ Commenting on his themes Alan Brown writes, "He has taken for his themes such things as the gap between human hope and cold reality, the illusory nature of choice in life, frustration with one's lot in a present which is dismal, and in face of a future which brings only age and death,"² Likewise David Timms notes, "Larkin is getting more and more pessimistic as he gets older."³ Richard Ellman's view of Larkin's poems is often "melancholy contemplation, though he has some reservations about the nature of the poet's disappointment."⁴ David Timms also argues that Larkin's poetry as a whole "sees life as a bleak, sometimes horrifying business"⁵. Ian Hamilton agrees and adds that the biggest problem with Larkin's poetry is its "rather narrow range of negative attitudes."⁶

These critics agree that Larkin's poems belong mostly to the negative order and that nothingness is sensible in all semblances of them. They also agree that the poems are remarkable for their fundamental honesty to experience. Movement poetry which, began as a revolt against the rhetorical excesses of the Forties and the cosmic pretentiousness of the Twentieth upheld the alternative traditions of Thomas Hardy as highly respectable. Graham Hough is of the view, "the post-1950 verse marks a return to the true tradition of poetry represented by Hardy, Graves It remarks a triumph of clarity after the formless mystifications of the last 20 years."⁷ In a similar way Alastair Fowler remarks, "The Movement poets returned to what they saw as the true English tradition. They eschewed foreign entanglements, weak syntax and obvious difficulty and they brought everyday life back into poetry."⁸

Largely under Hardy's influence Larkin came to write only of personal experience in a conversational idiom, with no illusions about the limitations of hope and happiness, which that experience offered him and his generation. All the volumes published so far except *The North Ship*, give a clear-eyed view of contemporary living and its problems. In this book he writes:

To wake and hear a cock
Out of the distance crying –
To pull the curtain back
And see the clouds flying.

.....

As sad as the sad wind
That walks around my bed

.....

The stones would shine like gold
above each sodden grave,
this, I had not foretold,
nor the birds' calmour, nor
his image morning gave
of more and ever more,
as some vast seven-piled wave,
mane-flinging, manifold,
streams at an endless shore.

The North Ship begins with a persona who thinks on his desire to write a song 'as sad as the sad wind /that walks around my bed'. He

goes on to a grave yard to visit the dead, perhaps to gain melancholic inspiration. The poem reveals the inevitable derivativeness of a young writer so far as the romantic atmosphere and the sense of world-weariness in it are concerned.

In the poem, *Next Please* Larkin presents through an extended metaphor the concern of man for his future. We watch our future in the same way one might watch a ship from a cliff or a 'bluff', to use the very word in the poem. The ship like hope always approaches slowly but growing clearer all the time. Ships are glittering sailing vessels with ornamented heads. So also the objects of our desires are always very attractive before they are achieved. When they are realized they begin to pale. "The armada of promises is only an illusion in the face of death." says Larkin. The poem finishes on a characteristic note of a huge and birdless silence. In the waters of the ocean only the ship could be seen, which itself is symbolic of a black-sail, quite an unfamiliar one to the mind that is tossed on worldliness. Life's ups and downs always bow down the human beings in such a speedy motion that they for a moment forget themselves. The only hope for betterment can be to control our senses and wait for the better hour to come. In such a state of bliss one could hope to get at new meaning, away from the breeding ill-wills or break of continuity.

The poems *The Less Deceived* (1955), *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964) and *The High Window* (1974), have caught the real tone of the poet, which is that of a man who has lost his opportunities, failed to get his desire and always found life less than it might have been. A stoic calm prevails in most of the poems in Larkin's second volume, *The Less Deceived*. The attempt here is to find a manner at once warm, cold and steeped in futility, but not altogether extinguished by it. The poem deals with the theme of a drugged and raped girl in Victorian London. The theme is central to Larkin's works. The poet directly addresses the girl back through the years. The grief of the victim merges into the sensation grief of the poet. He tries to relive her in vain. The only consolation he can offer her is that her suffering is 'exact', suffering being the most important element in life for spiritual development. She will grow and mature by her knowledge that such order and such density existed. The fulfillment of the rapist is only a disappointment, a blundering into confusion. The rapist would have known desolation more bitter after the fulfillment of his desire. This, Larkin insists, is not a negative attitude towards experience, a warning that we should avoid it, but an imaginative celebration of what is

truest and the most important element in life for spiritual development.

The poem *The Less Deceived* begins with a gloomily overpowering image: "There is an evening coming in / across the fields, one never seen before, / that lights no lamps." The approaching darkness intimated here is suffocating, deadening, confining. In addition, it is frightening: "Silken it seems at a distance, yet / when it is drawn up over the knees and breast / it brings no comfort." This is no "down blanket" of a quiet evening bringing with it. The poem ends with a series of questions underscoring the "going" of light, or, more to the point, the coming of a vast, nullifying darkness:

Where has the tree gone, that locked
Earth to sky? What is under my hands,
That I cannot feel?
What loads my hands down?

The poem tries to expose the debate between hope and hopelessness, between fulfillment and disappointment.

"Church Going," Larkin's most anthologized poem is about going to church not religion. According to G.S.Fraser, "the poem Church Going is the movement's prized poem. It is a poem with a claim its greatness and it is important as a statement of the mid 20th century consciousness as Arnold's *Dover Beach* was of the mid 19th." ¹⁰ In an age when religion no longer seems valid, church going may mean but a casual visiting. A young agnostic stop in front of a church during a cycle rides and goes in to have a look round. At first his thoughts make it just 'another church' filled with religious marks: 'little books', a small neat organ ' , some brass and stuff / up at the holy end', parchment, plate, and Through some flippant remarks like 'some brass and stuff/up at the holy end', he tries to suggest church and religion's redundancy. There is a sense in which this is a meditation about how the church is going out of use in modern life.

The place was not worth stopping for.
yet stop I did: in fact I often do,
and always end much at a loss like this,
wondering what to look for.

But then he feels that it is hunger for something serious that makes him stop in front of it. The church deserves reverence as a kind of

repository of the profoundest human feeling which should be invested in one spot; the poet thus reluctantly calls into question not only his own skepticism but the English man's in general.

Dispersed, yet tending to this cross of ground
through suburb because it held unsplit
so long and equably what since is found
only in separation-marriage, and birth,
and death, and thoughts of these-for which was built
this special shell?

Though believing the traditional religious significance of churches has been dispersed, he still finds himself "tending to this cross of ground" because of what is once represented and affirmed, at least on the ceremonial level-birth, marriage, and death.

Life is a bleak and horrifying business in several of the poems in *The Whitsun Weddings*. In 'Dockery and Son' Larkin treats it first as boredom and then as fear. Mr. Bleany is an extreme example of the modern man's sordid life with its mediocre surroundings and habits. The very name combines the notions of all that is bleak and mean. In a grimy unimaginative room he lives in a death-like passiveness until his employers remove him. He is poor and shoddy, having no family ties and not apparent responsibilities. There is a pattern for the life of every man which begins in habit and ends in pessimism and death. In 'Ambulances' he remarks that death is a 'solving emptiness'. In 'Toads' and in 'Poetry of Departures' the poet explores the possibility of getting away from the timid world of work and home. In 'The Toad revisited', a continuation to 'Toads', the very acceptance of the help of work in getting through the journey of life is felt. This acceptance of defeat,

Give me your arm, old Toad,
Help me down the Cemetery Road

can not be read without recognizing the exaggeration of the poet's light. In 'Toads Revisited in the Darker Mood' the routine of work is seen as a necessary barrier to keep our loneliness, boredom and meaninglessness. Larkin is able to make positive poetry from the negative feelings. In another poem 'As Bad a Mile', Larkin makes his failure to hit a waste basket with an apple-core into a failure which

spreads up his arm until he sees Adam before the apple is eaten and his own mishap is overwhelmed in the greater disaster of the fall. It is the miserable aspect of life that always encourages him to write such poems.

With the publication of *The High Windows* the formula of Larkin's poetic terrain became clearer. This anthology signals the deepening of his bitterness, disillusion and pessimism. The themes of age, loneliness and death are created most alarmingly. *The High Window* remarks a critic, "by its range and even more by its depth, is Larkin's most distinguished achievement and even on its own would do much to establish him as the poet of the common contemporary man. He is the authentic voice of their skepticism, disillusion and deep despair."¹¹ He finds his skepticism tempered by a difficult to articulate, metaphysical longing that brings about an affirmation regarding human existence.

And immediately
rather than words come 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.

The windows see through the artificiality of traditional religion and its images, suggesting a new secular truth: that human life is without clear purpose and is nothing and nowhere and is endless. The endless truth is that human purpose and religious belief are impossible. What we are left with in the poem, is not despair since the final tone of the poem is affirmative. The image of the high windows ironically affirms the speaker's longing for hope for religiosity.

'Living' is the most impressive and startling poem in this anthology. It depicts three separate ways of living in different circumstances and in different periods. In its centre piece Larkin is nearest to revealing his own existence. The speaker is a lighthouse keeper, alone in the midst of the 'Salts/Unsown stirring fields 'of water'. The light-house symbolizes both creativity and intense loneliness. No kind of life, or living in the sense of a job, but awareness of the situation is a kind of mysterious advantage.

'The Building' has a closer link with 'Church Going'. The poem is the picture of a hospital seen frighteningly. While Larkin certainly does not promote the idea that modern medicine is ultimately any more likely to deliver on its promises than faith is, the last line once

again at least seems to acknowledge the same human need. The flowers taken by those visiting their sick and perhaps soon to be dead friends and loved ones are wasteful and weak but they are also propitiatory. So both the buildings, church and hospital, serve a deeper purpose as symbols of our attempts to transcend the inevitability of our own extinction. Beneath all the apparent cheerfulness, hope and healing,

All know they are going to die
not yet, perhaps not here, but in the end.

This is a stage of desolation more somber than that depicted in 'Church Going'. There is a reference to a locked church and the cathedrals have failed to outbid the coming dark. The faint note of hope in 'Church Going' is silenced here and the 'Coming Dark' which is far more than a personal death, has not yet arrived, we feel its imminence.

'Going Going' deplors another kind of menace, "the utter irrevocable spoliation of all that is meant by England, the mindless destruction of it."¹² The dark night of the English Civilization must come soon. The poem reads like the present generation's epitaph. Unlike Auden, struggling by the same negation and despair, Larkin cannot show an affirming flame. Existence is not for him something to rejoice over or lament, it is simply the aching acceptance of the doom. His language has been throughout skeptical, hardy and soiled with disappointment. Whatever its degree of formality an eloquent taciturnity is its peculiarity. His style betrays a reluctance to use words. The short lines and clipped syntax suggest an almost painful language. Larkin's laconic remark conveys the poverty of the sayable. He feels pressed back himself by a vision of the unjustified and the unjustifiable reality. This has frozen Larkin's mouth.

In a statement contributed to D. J. Enright's anthology of *Poets of the 1950's* Larkin says:

I wrote poems to preserve things I have seen,
thought and felt 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 own sake, Why I should do this, I
have no idea, but I think the impulse to preserve lies
at the bottom of all art .¹³

From the brief analysis of a few poems attempted here, it is obvious that it is world without any generative fire that Larkin often mourns. He does not rejoice in the spirit of life that is in man. His complaint against life is that it has never lured him. Its very indifference and its failure to have any use for him make him want to reject it. This doesn't mean that his mind is wholly a mind to winter; gleam of light is there, some flicker of life, a wish for a moment of frolic out of doors. Alongside poems of the most intense gloom and alarm, larkin also develops the affirmative features of his talent.

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