

Philip Larkin, as a poet

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Abstract:

"No, Renaissance, please"

The poet who has no optimism about human possibilities is Philip Larkin, he is the poet of the un-lived life of the English province's, the abysmal landscapes, the industrial froth, be faced part and synthetic finery, and the second and third rate standards. He writes about the compromise and self-deceptions of those around him life for him is a futile progression towards the emptiness of death. This makes Larkin's range narrow and shows a passively resigned distaste for contemporary life. He is humble and honest without having any 'Ivory tower' attitude about him.

Introduction:

"Hatless, I take off"

Cecil Day Lewis mentions two ideals of the poets of today. 1. Social Justice, 2. Artistic Integrity. On the one hand poets believe that poetry is written for the whole man, intellect, emotions; on the other they hold, that they will not submit to any system of the theoretical constraints or a collection of unconscious demands.

Larkin's clarity reflects the honesty of purpose. His poetry does not ignore or distort the syntax. Eliot did not attempt to convert us into an inconsistent series of causes (like Auden), and nor did he scatter up the debris of images from one's subconscious (like Dylan Thomas).

There is nothing negative or inhibited in Larkin's poetry. The artist who was content with a couple of poems a year to satisfy his poetic urge was never a full-time writer. At the same time, this shows a high degree of restraint & self-criticism. His language is lucid and memorable as it is also natural & forceful. He gives the impression of being a friendly & sensible person whose comments on life and people are both-sympathetic and stimulating.

He is a skilful craftsman and this quality enables him to build up a firm structure in his poems. It also helps him to portray realistic details of the contemporary scenes. His language has a recognisable rhythm and metrical verse. It inherits traditional virtues of poetry as a vehicle/medium of artistic expression. He takes a thoughtful look at England as it really is.

In 'Afternoons', with great honesty, he comments upon the tendency in recent years. The lovers are all in schools; he says, emphasising the unripe acorns of modern times.

'Church Going' is a poem expressing the ambiguous agnosticism of the readers, and yet ironically they will turn to it for relief, for a much clearer expression. The poet is honest and Englishman recognize this honesty of outlook in 'Nothing to be said.'

Larkin is naughty, snuffing a bathing photograph from a girl's album, visiting a church; he does not even give a valid six-pence. He jokes just this side of nihilism and all this honesty, intentionally done. This is because he knows that all these are Britain's national vices. He is like that for he is English, & Englishmen have only to blame themselves for this disease gentility so often found in English culture.

Larkin is sardonic at the expense of faith, religion, family, and of literary pretensions. He writes in a prosaic colloquial manner. He is no gifted seer according to himself, but a man speaking to other man. He expresses the human situation fully & adequately. Larkin alone is interested in the gradual tragedy of the 20th century. The tell-tale marks are left behind us everywhere - in rooms, in trains, on "high windows", leaving behind small tragedies, losses and frustrations. Such "objects" lend a reality to the person and not vice versa. This is inverted romanticism; and this is one of Larkin's characteristic and compelling effects of his poetry.

Unlike some of his contemporaries (Donald Barthelme, Robert Lowell, Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter), Larkin shows no hysteria, pretensions in parody, tragic grandeur, savage sardonicism or sharp sinisterity in his poems. He is plain & passive. He does not throw stones of fantasy, technical dazzle or fierce jokes at the Goliath of the void, because he knows them to be useless. Larkin presents not "a world elsewhere" but life "just here", denuded of libido and sentiment.

Larkin is vehement in his attack on modernism. He presents a world of "here & now", shorn of illusion and sentiment. His poems show this: "Next, Please", "Mr Bleaney", "Self's the Man", & "Vers de Société". Calvin calls his colloquial style "street favoured simplicity" is found here.

"Of, no one can deny, That Arnold is less selfish than I am."

Larkin's love poetry is essentially pessimistic. He agrees that successful love is the best reward wished for. But as P.R. King remarks "the general impression from reading Larkin is

"..... although man clutches at his instinctive
belief that only love will comfort- console and
sustain him, Such a hope is doomed to be denied.

A Theme that repeatedly occurs in Larkin is 'the conflict between the demand of the society and its disappointments.' Faith Healing touches on the general tendency of the society.....

'In everyone there sleeps
A sense of life, 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 lov'd'

Such outbursts make Larkin a romantic poet. The past absorbed is turned to the present. He transforms the romantic heroine to suit his vision. In his essential beauty, there are haunting visions of joy & oblivious circumstances, which remind us of Keats. Of "A Sherry Party" Larkin says:

"In a pig's arse friend
Day comes to an end
The gas fire breathes
The trees are darkly swayed"

In 'High Windows', he says:

"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."

Like other romantics, Larkin uses this strange effect of "buried sexual innuendo"..... It has a purity of concentration like innocence. Many of Larkin's poems have this quality of lyricism.

Larkin's art is thus varied and romantic in its ramifications. His romance also has a touch of humour. As Bayley observes:

"Larkin's deeply erotic romanticism makes fully explicit the humour (all humour being a substitute for despair) which is immanent in some Romanticism."

References:

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