

Philip Larkin's Ambivalent Attitudes toward Past Life

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This paper will examine the way Philip Larkin as a modern poet views unfavorable but inescapable past experiences with ambivalent attitudes. Larkin has written poems which concern the matters of time, aging, and death. Out of these related themes, the past has offered one major subject for Larkin's poems. Those poems on his personal experiences, coming out of his deep interest in the past and in the relationship the past has with his present and future life, reveal much of the poet's personality. Because of Larkin's conflicting attitudes towards past life, however, the poems about his past create both ambivalence and attraction in the readers' minds. The unusual restraint of emotion and conflict revealed in the poems about past life render rare modern lyrics that are unlike exuberant romantic poems.

I

Philip Larkin has written representative poems of personal reminiscences. Especially, many poems which appear in his mature volumes deal with his past life and the irreversibility of aging. According to Julia Whitsitt, Larkin's poetry, especially the poems which contain the

images of past life, whether they are "societal" or "personal" past, represents one such post-modernist way of coming to terms with the past in the twentieth century" (27).

The deep attraction or the poignancy of Larkin's poems on the past derives from his unique style of abstention and distance. As in elegiac poems of the Romantic period, he often shows a reverence for places and activities which contain and perpetuate the deepest human feelings. And those images of purity and serenity which surround his past life seem to linger in his solitary moments, while making him rise above the limitations of present living. Nevertheless, he shows much effort not to become more exuberantly romantic as in the case of Romantic poets, while trying not to repulse or ignore his past experiences as insignificant. Rather than an unsophisticated reliance on romanticization or mythologizing of his past life, Larkin seems to "move beyond denial to detachment" (Whitsitt 29). Although he is constantly conscious of the importance of the past life in his present moments, he shows in his poems his effort to detach himself from its specific and vivid details.

Larkin delicately, though consciously, tries to disclaim his past as something he cannot much remember in his treatment of the subjects related to his past life. The reason for his timidity about his past can be explained by dipping into his real life story as well as by understanding his personality. It is true that, in spite of his rich imaginative mind, his real life lacked the opportunities and excitements which offer the poet various subjects of interest. His biographers describe the young Larkin as a mediocre boy of modest circumstances. Except for his voracious reading and writing habits, and his deep interest in jazz, not much about his childhood before the Oxford period is known. Also, as Bruce Martin describes, his "scorn of literary biography or autobiography attending too much to childhood or youth" expresses the poet's attitude toward his own past life most succinctly (14).

For Larkin, nonetheless, the past operates as a necessary illusion, occasionally allowing him to dwell in a world different from the monotonous present. Larkin sees the past as a *means of liberation from the tedious present*. As Martin suggests "man's proneness to illusion" can become "a mixed blessing" while affording him temporary escape from "the bleakness of reality" as Larkin oftentimes views it (48). To be liberated he must have liked to dwell on the past apart from his busy schedule. In Kingsley Weatherhead's view, for Larkin, "an important way of maintaining equilibrium in a stressful existence is occasional engagement with past" (618). James Naremore insists that Larkin did not reject his past so radically or so comfortably as he sometimes implies:

[T]he traditional view of his development has him casting aside romanticism in favor of an empirical, Movement poetic; [. . .]. From the beginning, Larkin's work has manifested a certain coolness and lack of self-esteem, a need to withdraw from experiences; but at the same time it has continued to show his desire for a purely secular type of romance, [. . .]. (333)

It appears that, just as his love and enjoyment of poetry, his indulgence in his past experiences offered him moments of relaxation. It is also evident that he saw his past life with conflicting views of both nostalgia and repugnance.

II

The role the past plays on a person's mind is displayed in several poems in which Larkin attempts to resolve his complex feelings in dealing with his past events. According to Martin, for Larkin, as he tries to solve "the Riddle of Time, that element in which we seem to move in the present," the present moment is always deeply related to his past, as

well as to his future dreams (47). The memory of his past experiences often affects his present with its frustration and disappointment, though it allows him a temporary relief from present situations.

The importance the past has in its relation to the present moment is stressed in the poems about the theme of the continuum of time. In "Triple Time," Larkin speaks of the present moment as "an empty street . . . unrecommended by event." Ironically, as the poet notes, the present is both the future once dreamed of and the past soon to be recalled with nostalgia or regret. The poem stresses the "emptiness" of the present unless it is supplied by past dreams and memory which operates on it. The present is the only reflection of the past and the future which also soon becomes past.

A man's difficulty to remain in the present and the continual expectation for the unknown future is expressed in "Next, Please." In the poem Larkin compares our habitual anticipation to sitting on a bluff waiting for the ship to come in loaded with compensations for past failures and disappointments. Just as this ship proves to be an illusion, so does the presumed time of its arrival, which immediately turns from anticipated future to regretted past. With understanding Larkin catches here "the emotion attending man's inability to be simplistically rooted in the present" (Martin 47). Martin insists that these faculties, especially our "memory and imagination," while separating the human beings from the lower animals as rational beings, "undo us"; for him, they are the elements which merely "make us more frustrated than we would be without them" (47).

On the other hand, the poem "I Remember, I Remember" presents the ineffectualness of the memories through the speaker's unexpected reminder of the past experiences in a descriptive pattern:

Coming up England by a different line
For once, early in the cold year,

We stopped, and, watching men with number-plates
 Sprint down the platform to familiar gates,
 'Why, Coventry!' I exclaimed. 'I was born here.' (1-5)

The poem's opening lines make the readers as well as the speaker in the poem expect some rosy-colored recollections. As the speaker "sat back" concentrating on his memory, the friend responds with a smile, "'was that where you "have your roots"?"' Normally in this situation the speaker is supposed to remember significant events as the poem's title makes clear. However, those expectations simply turn out to be a futile effort. The power of the poem derives from the invalidity of those expectations and, ultimately, from the memories' absence from the actual place. The poem gives only a very abstract description of the speaker's past life, which is filled with vague images and impressions of the person as if in a dreamland. The speaker's story turns out to be a non-story about the "nothing" as he claims in the last line's paradoxical statement. While the poem clearly is, in one sense, as Andrew Motion calls it, "an expression of personal and literary autonomy"; in another sense, it acknowledges the seductive power of what Motion calls "Romantic and Lawrentian notions of childhood" (22). The power of those "notions" is implicit in the vehemence with which the speaker denies and refutes them. The speaker as Larkin himself attains his "autonomy" only after "dismantling the structures of rootedness" just like any other "rootless twentieth-century man" (Whitsitt, 28):

By now I've got the whole place clearly charted.
 Our garden, first; where I did now invent
 Blinding theologies of flowers and fruits,
 And wasn't spoken to by an old hat.

 And, in those offices, my doggerel
 was not set up in blunt ten-point, nor read

By a distinguished cousin of the mayor,
 Who didn't call and tell my father There (16-31)

Sometimes, an individual's inability to catch the fleeting past moment is expressed in Larkin's poems. In "Home is so Sad," Larkin stresses the way the home "stays as it was left" as if trying to "win back" departed children. The personified "home" is sad and "withers" silently because it remains static. The poem describes that the "joyous shot at how things ought to be," so hopefully launched, has by now "long fallen wide" of the mark, leaving behind only such artifacts as "The pictures and the cutlery / The music in the piano stool. That vase." In this highly personal poem, the speaker of the poem, measuring the distance between the adult self and "home," seems to sense the other side of the experience in Coventry. The family that created the "home" might still tend it despite the children's departure. The home has wishes like a mother; it wants the children to remember and to return to it seeking fond memories. The poem, as Whitsitt says, might represent the speaker's belief in "mythological childhood" (29). However, the old experience and feelings which memories make possible are not available, and what remains is a "stultifying shell," and to present the pictures and the cutlery represents "a futile effort to make permanent what is necessarily fleeting and time-bound" (Whitsitt 29).

In a different situation Larkin expresses the impulse to escape from personal memories and not to be bound by those. In "Forget What Did" the speaker's deliberate effort to be restricted "by such words, such actions" of past experiences becomes apparent. The speaker of the poem decides not to continue a diary in an effort to escape from being "cicatrized" by the personal past. The effort to preserve the personal past in a diary represents an impulse toward petrification, the desire to fix events in words, in the poem. Just as the futile efforts of the family of "Home is Sad" to preserve the lively personal memories, the speaker of

the poem realizes the ineffectualness of keeping one's past in a diary. The image of "cicatrix" as that of both restriction and possibilities works effectively; its terrifying image explains the danger of fixing the past on a page which might stultify one's present and future events, if a person dwells on them self-consciously for long.

Instead, the poem offers an alternative use for "the empty pages" remaining in the diary:

Should they ever be filled
let it be with observed
Celestial recurrences,
The day the flowers come,
And When the birds go. (14-18)

The realistic self-consciousness here is striking: the personal past, with its unrepeatable, irrevocable linear progression, will fill pages with stultifying self-examination. Better by far is attention paid to the natural world and its patterns. "Celestial recurrences" are, in some sense, recoverable and repeatable as words and actions are not, and so offer the possibility of perpetual renewal through identification with something larger than the self.

The conflicting strains in Larkin's personality are perhaps most evident in the next two poems. In "Sad Steps," he rejects the romantic notions of the past experiences for himself, but suggests other possibilities for unknown people and the world. In the poem the moon appears to be the "reminder" of the speaker's past experiences. The moon in this poem looks just beautiful, but the speaker here becomes defensively cynical. The moon which is, a "Lozenge of love," a "Medallion of art," at the same time represents a painful reminder of his past life. Larkin implies that the superficial romanticism of his earlier perception was, as James Naremore portrays, "part of the 'strength and pain' of

being young--a feeling that won't come again, however much he half-consciously longs for it" (334).

The speaker notices the clarity of the moon--"(Stone-colored light sharpening the roofs below) / High and preposterous and separate"-- but instead of interpreting this in traditional romantic fashion, he sees it as a reminder of youth, which, while still strong for some, can never return to him. He rejects pretensions here and listens to thoughts and sees how

The hardness and the brightness and the plain
far-reaching singleness of that wide stare
Is a reminder of the strength and pain
Of being young; that it can't come again,
But is for others undiminished somewhere. (14-18)

And while the experience of youth is now remote from him, as Alan Brownjohn suggests, he "can nevertheless affirm its powerful sense of hopefulness" (23).

However, while in that poem the feeling of desolation disappears in a wave of empathy and hopeful suggestions, in "How Distant" the character develops the sense of his distance from "being young" by noting examples of youthful setting forth; here he does so as one who understands the youthful temptation of escape to the unknown but who cannot return himself to such a state (Martin 41). In the title poem of his last volume "High Windows," the Larkin speaker meditates on the gulf between himself and the young. The freedom Larkin finds from his remembrance of past struggles and conflicts, especially on those which religious foreboding could have brought, is represented by the image of "high windows." The speaker's memory of past thoughts, as he observes the current freedom of the youth from fear in sex, is replaced by bright, clear images of blue skies:

And immediately

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. (16-20)

Though the question of what lies beyond the "deep blue air" remains unresolved in the poem, the images suggest, surprisingly, a certain mind which is pure and indefinite, devoid of any bondage of past thoughts or regretful feelings.

III

Larkin's attitude toward his past life remains complicated as some of his poems describe, revolving around both impulses to repulse it as some element which is disadvantageous, and to become attracted to it for the escape from the dull, empty present life. Within his restrained phrases he projects a realistic perception of his past experiences, which cannot be erased or ignored. Especially in his mature period of writing in which a painful awareness of oncoming age figures in a number of poems, the Larkin speaker speculates on the differences between his present and the irrecoverable past. His inconsistent attitude seems natural for the poet with a clear observance of his present. The poet knows that, however he tries to avoid the unfavorable side of his past, the past still remains in his mind, closely related to his present life and even to his future world. He conceives his past not as a separate entity but as a part in the continuum of personal history. Also he understands that it is impossible to reject some unfavorable part of his past from his life. The unique treatment of the past events in Larkin's poems represents a sophisticated way of depicting a modern man's dilemma.

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