

Shadow of Modernism and Symbolism in the Poems of Philip Larkin

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Abstract

Philip Arthur Larkin is popular for his few beautiful accumulations containing extraordinary poems with modernist and symbolist highlights. 'Symbolism' is an openly sorted out scholarly and masterful development that started with a gathering of French artists in the late nineteenth century, spread to painting and the theatre, impacted the European and American writings of the twentieth century to shifting degrees. Symbolist craftsmen tried to express individual enthusiastic experience through the unpretentious and suggestive utilization of exceptionally symbolized dialect. On another hand 'Innovation', in human expressions, an extreme break with the past and the simultaneous look for new types of articulation. Innovation cultivated a time of experimentation in human expressions from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, especially in the years following World War I. This paper expects to investigate these highlights of innovation and imagery in the selected poems of Larkin's famous graceful accumulations.

Key Words: Symbolism, Modernism, Realistic Details and Direct Expression

After the first half of the twentieth century when we turn to the poetry of Philip Larkin and his group poets, we try to become more realistic, more accurate and more direct. By total study of the different steps through which Larkin's poetic journey begins and concludes, we are put in a queer position of dilemma. By his own verdict, he was highly influenced by W.B. Yeats and T.S. Elliot in his early poetic career. The poems of his poetic collection *The North Ship* were written directly under the influence of these two symbolist poets. But in his later developments, he admitted his preference for Hardy and his knowing disillusionment with W.B. Yeats. That is why the poems of 1964 published under the title *The Whitsun Wedding* show their close proximity with Thomas Hardy. So, what he said in 1966 is faithfully followed by him "Thomas Hardy has replaced W.B. Yeats as the main influence of his

poetry.” In this manner, it becomes clear that Larkin was trying to emerge as a poet of direct expression of his realistic details. But it was not so easy for him to leave off the previous influences which had performed his poetic nursery. His famous poetic collection *High Windows* published in 1974 was again deeply rooted in symbolism. It was with the help of the device of symbolism that Larkin could intensify with greater emphasis on the poetic truth as conceived by him. It is, perhaps, in this background that Andrew Motion and Barbara Everette authentically regard him as a poet of Symbolist Movement.

So, the real force of Philip Larkin’s poetry may be found in his use of the techniques of symbolism, knowingly or unknowingly. A few poems of *High Windows* make him a great poet of this technique. The title poem in itself possesses the great strength of symbolic mode. The two young lovers are shown in their sexual postures. On the other hand, there is a realistic picture of the modern society of the Westerns. Actually, the freedom of sexual relationship was coming in 1960s. There was growing awareness of the people towards the rising demands of the adolescents who wanted to come out openly leaving aside the game of hide and seek of the previous generations in the matter of sexual life. But the closing lines of the poem denote a direct use of symbolism for communicating a better philosophical meaning:

And beyond it, the deep blue air,
that shows
Nothing, and is nowhere,
and is endless.

(*High Windows*)

The lines quoted above are thought to be highly effective in the use of the technique of symbolism. In the opinion of Barbara Everett, the last lines of this poem remind us of the technique of the French symbolist poetry. In her own words, ‘closing lines depicting the deep blue air are reminiscent of Mallarme’s most consistent and philosophical symbol.’ Really, *High Windows* opening towards the endless blue sky symbolically presents the high affair of sex ending in nothingness. The blue colour of the sky is closely associated with the blue pleasure of sex finding their conclusion in nullity. Another great poem of the same poetic collection *High Windows* is ‘Going, Going’ which also makes its mark as a poem of

symbolistic technique. We do not know whether Larkin is making the use of symbolistic technique knowingly, but the ideas contained in the poem are enough to show the deep rooted character in the technique of symbolism. The term ‘going, going’ is related to auction. The green pastures are shown as at auction. Symbolically, the green pastures stand for naturalness, peace, pastoral beauty and ecological balance. By the use of the term ‘going, going’, the poet hits at the great problem of ecological imbalance, industrial waste and the loss of peacefulness in the hands of materialistic values. To mark the following lines:

And that will be England gone,
The shadows, the meadows, the anes,
The guildhalls, the carved choirs, the carved choirs.
There’ll be books; it will linger on
In galleries; but all that remains
For us will be concrete and tyres.
Most things are never meant.
This won’t be most likely: but greeds
And garbages are too thick-strewn
To be swept up now, or invent
Excuse that make them all needs
I just think it will happen, soon.

(‘Going, Going’)

‘The Explosion’ of the same poetic collection also develops the use of symbolism towards its end. The aftermath of the explosion has great symbolic meaning. The poem develops the situation of several dead men in the explosion. The priest consoles the bereaved women that the surviving members of the community would see the departed ones face to face. In the end, there is a hallucination and the widows see their dead husbands coming back to life and looking longer than they ever were.

Wives saw man of the explosion
Larger than in life they managed-
Gold as on a coin, or walking
Somehow from the sum towards them,

One showing the eggs unbroken

(‘The Explosion’)

It is with the effective use of symbolism that the poet is capable of enforcing the philosophical ideas of death. The larger vision of the reappearing dead persons is symbolic of their better attainment after death. Their character has been exalted by death. ‘Holding the skylark’s eggs unbroken’ also symbolises great achievements of the dead persons. Even in the scientific conclusions, egg has cosmic vision. The unbroken egg is the symbol of cosmic reality. These interpretations of the poem connect Philip Larkin to Yeatsian mode of symbolism. In his ‘The Second Coming’, Yeats has also used symbol of cosmic vision by presenting the image of gyre. The image of unique figure with lion like body and the face of the man symbolically signify violent disorder in the existing system and new creation at hand. The symbol of egg in the hands of the dead man coming to life again is also indicative of some creation of better order than the one in which explosions take place. In this manner, it can be realised that Philip Larkin’s ultimate destiny is to seek its glory in the realm of symbolism. His *High Windows* confirms his better advancement towards his destined aim. Andrew Motion asserts:

In *High Windows* the two sides of Larkin’s literary personality are sharply distinguished. The book contains more purely symbolist moment than *The Whitsun Weddings* (‘Solar’, for instance or ‘Money’ and more freely imaginative ‘Livings’, ‘Dublinesque’ and ‘The Explosion’), but these things are offset by a more remorseless factuality, a greater crudity of language (in ‘The Card Players’ for example) and often blatantly simple pessimism (‘Man Hands on Misery to Man’).

In his earlier poetic collection *The Less Deceived*, Philip Larkin had already shown his sympathies with the symbolist trends. The poems like ‘Coming’, ‘Church Going’, and ‘Absences’ developed on the implied use of symbolism. Andrew Motion does not remain silent on this point and speaks thus:

Where ‘Absences’, ‘Say’ or ‘Coming’ or even ‘Next, Please’ in its muted fashion, rise from observed and cramping families to a world of imaginative

freedom, 'Dry-Point' never escapes its own thwarting imprecision. It is a revealing but untypical poem and in the two collections he has published after the one in which it appears – *The Less Deceived* – he never again experimented so radically. In fact, had Larkin stopped writing after *The Whitsun Weddings*, it would have seemed that he had renounced symbolism altogether.

Thus, it becomes clear that Philip Larkin was a conscious symbolist in his rising career. For some time he tried to renounce this influence but could hardly do so. His symbolist sympathies came on the forefront with the publication of *High Windows*, which decided the direction of his poetic journey. So, he is with the modern poets and note of modernity overpowers all other considerations in his poetry.

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