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INFLUENCE OF W. B. YEATS ON THE POETRY OF PHILIP LARKIN

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Yeats' influence on Philip Larkin. We know that Larkin was a national favourite poet who was commonly referred to as "England's other Poet Laureate". As Larkin has said that he spent three years trying to write like Yeats. Larkin imitated Yeats in a fairly direct way, admitting that he had been swept away by Yeats' music, and appropriating the image as well as the romantic and melancholy tone of his early Celtic Period. Larkin's early work shows the influence of Yeats. His first book, *The North Ship*, published in 1945 at his own expense, reflects his early infatuation with Yeats. Afterwards *The Less Deceived*, published in 1955, marked Larkin as an up-and-coming poet. The title itself makes clear Larkin's newfound disillusionment with Yeats and modernism in general. Two more collections followed at similarly lengthy intervals: *The Whitsun Weddings* (1965), considered by many to be his finest achievement, and his last collection *High Windows* (1974), confirmed him as one of the finest poets in English Literary History.

Keywords: Modernist, Symbolist, Yeatsian, Metaphor, Movement.

Philip Larkin, the British poet, novelist, essayist and a jazz critic was a leading voice of the Movement poetry which pervaded English Literature in the Post-World War II period. This man invented the name "The Movement" in 1953 for the work of a number of poets who included Kingsley Amis, John Wain, Elizabeth Jennings, Thom Gunn, Donald Davie and D.J. Enright. Larkin's poems were also included in an anthology, "New Lines" of these poets. These poems of the 1950s were vastly different from the poems which had been written in the preceding two decades. If his concerns appear too narrow and his style too conventional, Larkin more than compensates for his limitations by his wit and intelligence. Many critics consider him the finest poet in England today. If one critic designates Larkin as modernist, another calls him a post-modernist poet. Motion takes into account Larkin's famous

antimodernist stance and yet goes onto claim that "Larkin hasabsorbed and adapted a number of strategies that derive from the modernists in general and symbolists in particular."(Motion, 12) Larkin as a poet of second half of the 20th century, wrote symbolist poems early in his poetic career and then returned again to the symbolist mode of writing during the last phase of his poetic career, though the symbolist influence shows itself in a faint but unmistakable form in the intervening period also. In 1943, Larkin wrote a poem entitled "Femmes Damnees" in which the symbolist element is quite obvious, in which there is a strong echo of a poem having the same title, written by the French symbolist poet Baudelaire. Actually, Larkin had in the beginning, been deeply influenced by the symbolist poetry of the French poets of the late 19th century. Barbara Everett argues that Larkin critically

employed the special devices of French symbolist poetry by parodying and modifying them in his own way, and thereby offered "a moral and emotional equivalent" of the symbolists' "aesthetic sensibility" Everett, therefore concludes that in Larkin's poetry "Symbolism is ... used negatively, in a post or even anti symbolist fashion...Larkin's symbolist imagery is a disrelation with the idealizing originals more than a relationship with them."(Everette, 240)

Larkin's symbolist potential received an impressive recognition from Seamus Heaney, who acknowledged Larkin's detailed social observation, but he also noted a simultaneous yearning for transcendence and revelation in Larkin's poetry. He finds Larkin's pessimistic because he judges him from the Yeatsian view point of transcendentalism of the Miloszite stance of anti-rationalism. But Larkin's once wrote: "Poetry is an affair of sanity, of seeing things as they are. The less a writer's work approximate to this maxim, the less claim he has on the attention of his contemporaries and of posterity.(Larkin, 197) The symbolist influence is paramount in Larkin's work in the poems of the volume entitled "The North Ship" and "The Less Deceived". Larkin informs his readers that in 1945 or thereabout when The North Ship was first published, Thomas Hardy had replaced W. B. Yeats as the main influence on his poetry. This remark by Larkin implied that he had discarded his symbolist sympathies and had turned to a traditional poet for inspiration. But the volume entitled "The Whitsun Weddings" hardly shows any symbolist or Yeatsian influence, though one or two poems even in this volume have been written in the symbolist mode. Then came, in 1974, Larkin's next volume of poems, entitled "High Windows", in which symbolism re-emerged and did so with great emphasis and even intensity. There is no doubt that, in the beginning, Larkin had fallen under the influence of W. B. Yeats. For instance, there are several poems in "The North Ship", which shows the symbolist influence of W. B. Yeats. As David Timms aptly observes, "Though we can spot Auden and Dylan Thomas only here and there in the North Ship, Yeats is everywhere".(Timms, 34) Like the early Yeats, Larkin here seems to be absorbed in feelings of sort of generalized sadness conveyed through a rhetorically

ornate phrasing, the "Music" which fascinated him so much. The poems of this collection articulate feelings of stasis, powerlessness, coldness, disgust and fear, in an arty manner, using a figurative language of symbolism full of dense, self-conscious poeticism, similes and metaphors that are imprecise and even occasionally confusing. While commenting on the use of symbols in the poems of "The North Ship", Andrew Motion cogently observes: "they obfuscate or dilute, throwing up their hands in repeated gestures of uncertainty. Even Ruth Bowman, who is obviously the spur for much of Larkin's emotion, is indeterminate. She is an unreal girl in an unreal place – Larkin's constant fascination is not her but his own condition". (Motion, 133) For Larkin the "single poet" was Yeats, and Larkin himself offered an explanation for the predominance of Yeats' influence in this volume. "Swamped up with Yeats" and as a result, Larkin said, "I spent the next three years trying to write like Yeats, not because I liked his personality or understood his ideas but out of infatuation with his music....It is a particularly potent music, pervasive as garlic, and has ruined many a better talent."(Larkin, 29)

The excessive ornateness of metaphor and reliance on the symbolist mode give way to an allegorical design in the title poem of the volume. "The North Ship" is a sequence of five short poems, operating within an allegorical-narrative framework which is Yeatsian.

.....went wide and far
Into an unforgiving sea
Under a fire-spilling star,
And it was rigged for a long
journey.

In these lines the ship, the sea and the wind-as symbolic equivalents of human condition, the ship standing for an individual, the sea for life, and the wind for circumstances. This stanza of the poem can be compared with the first stanza of Yeats' "Her Anxiety":

Earth in beauty dressed
Awaits returning spring.
All true love must die,
Alter at the best
Into some lesser thing.
Prove that I lie. (Yeats, 270)

"The North Ship" poems are definitely "Yeats-Y" in their themes, attitude and style. Larkin's later poetry, where they are treated more profoundly and with greater maturity. However, the Yeats absorbed by Larkin is, as he tells us in the introduction, the early Yeats of "the harsher last poems." (Larkin, 29) Motion appropriately describes "The North Ship" as a collection in which,

".....almost all [the poems are] languorously drooping in their rhythms and uninventively romantic in their references. They frequently borrow direct from Yeats, and general resemblances abound. Their mood is invariably gloomy without justification, their time of day dawn or dusk, their weather cold, rainy and windy, and their symbolic details monotonous: water, stars, ice, ships, candles, dreams, hands and beds occur with extraordinary frequency and no distinguishing features." (Motion, 33)

Another volume entitled "The Less Deceived" (1955) show the symbolist influence of W.B. Yeats. The poems Coming, Dry Point, Going and At Grass are examples of the use of symbolism. A poem entitled "Absences," belonging to Larkin's middle years, also has a strong symbolist element in it. This poem begins from a naturalistic context and then makes excited leaps between ideas. In the first stanza of this poem, the sea's roughness turns waves from fluids to solids- from floors to hollows to towers to hair to a wall- as it mimics the processes of change and purgation experienced by the speaker. Larkin in a radio talk said he wanted to write different sort of poems. "Someone once said that the great thing is not to be different from other people but different from yourself." He wished he could write more often like the last line of 'Absences' "Such attics cleared of me....." A highly personal poet, he uses symbolism as a mode of the impersonal, to liberate the poem from its own world. The symbolist devices of the poem 'Absences' disrupt the normal relationships between concepts by liberating Larkin from the familiar and narrow world.

In the poem 'Next, Please,' the final stanza is obviously symbolic in its significance. This stanza confirms the death-obsessed bleakness of the first

five stanzas. The final stanza tells us that there is only one ship which is seeking us, and this one ship is "a black-sailed unfamiliar," "towing at her back a huge and bridles silence." Behind this ship, "no waters breed or break." This stanza perfectly illustrates Yeats' view that symbols intensify a poem's emotional charge.

'Dry point' is Larkin's most purely symbolist poem. Here the lack of variety in tone and language emphasizes the speaker's preoccupation with being trapped. As he moves from symbol to symbol, grappling with his horror of sexual disappointment, he finds only a confirmation of losses, and a proof that fulfillment is unachievable. A degree of uncertainty about the poem's direction, which confirms the speaker's from the "bare and sun-scrubbed room." The speaker's symbolist vagueness is the cause of his predicament.

'At Grass' is realistic and traditional poem with a symbolic meaning which links it with the Yeatsian mode. The poem is about the race horses in their retirement.

The eye can hardly pick them out
From the cold shade they shelter in,
Till wind distresses tail and main;
Then one crops grass, and moves about
The other seeming to look on
And stands anonymous again

One of the horses is depicted as eating the grass growing on the ground, while another is depicted as moving about and then standing "anonymous" once again. This poem then contains a picture of how these race horses were at one time the cynosure of all eyes, and how they won the races, thus bringing honour to themselves and financial gain to those spectators who had staked their money on the hopefuls. The race horses symbolize something about success and failure and neglects to notice the threatening atmosphere of the modern social democracy. Symbolically speaking, the poem depicts the glorious achievements of a man in his past life and the ordinary, prosaic life which he is leading now in his old age which soon would be followed by the groom, namely death.

The poem 'Going' on the other hand is wholly symbolist one. The word 'going' here has been used metaphorically for a departure from this

world of living human beings. The poem begins with a metaphor and ends with a metaphor; and the idea of the poem has been conveyed by the use of symbols. This poem written under the Yeatsian influence, and according to the symbolist or modernist mode.

There is not much of symbolist writing in the poems of the volume entitled "The Whitsun Wedding." There are two poems in this volume which show that Larkin had not forsaken symbolism altogether. These two poems are 'The Whitsun Wedding' and 'Water'. In the first named poem Larkin is released from the empirically observed world and its attendant disappointment into a world of transcendent imaginative fulfillment. In the poem 'Water' the metaphor introduced at the very outset is gradually developed and intensified until the final stanza in which the earthly glass of water becomes more than simply a sign and object of worship. The use of water throughout the poem is a powerful symbolism. Larkin parallels religion and water in:

And I should rise in the east
A glass of water

He substitutes the blood of Christ, as presented during Holy Communion, for water. By replacing blood or wine with water, Larkin removes religion's colour, potency and flavor.

The symbolist characteristic in many other poems of "High Windows" (e.g., 'Cut Grass,' 'Solar,' 'The Explosion' and most conspicuously, the title poem), and this structural strategy provides a significant clue to the philosophy of life, the poet attained in the mature stage of his career. Heaney finds what he calls "visionary moments" in the poems of the volume entitled "High Windows"; and he uses the word 'symbolist' twice to describe the linguistic structures of the poems in this volume. He points out the unusual diction of the poem 'Sad Steps': "O wolves of memory, immensemments!" He also praises the poem 'Solar' as a hymn to the sun, in which the poet is evidently very far from the "hatless" individual who had taken off his cycle-clips "in awkward reverence" in the poem 'Church Going'. Larkin adopts the dislocations, illogicalities, and imaginative excitement of symbolism to redeem himself from distressing daily circumstances. The closing lines of the poem 'The Explosion' are

evidently symbolic. The dead men are seen by their wives coming towards them from the sun and looking larger than they had looked during their lives. Death has exalted them and greatly enlarged their stature. This is a transcendental thought which fits in with the symbolic mood. In 'The Building', Larkin here asserts the value of life while making a contrast between the outside world and the world inside the hospital:

Outside seems old enough;
Red brick, lagged pipes, and someone
walking by it
Out to the car park, free. Then past the
gate,
Traffic; a locked church; short terraced
streets
Where kids chalk games, and girls with hair-
dos fetch.

The hospital presented here as a natural symbol not only of human mortality but also of an expression of the human desire to physically and spiritually structure this building into a substitute cathedral.

The most remarkable poem in this context is "Bridge for the Living" which was written after the publication of 'High Windows', is transmuted into a symbolic reality,

Reaching for the world, as our lives do,
As all lives do, reaching that we may give
The best of what we are and hold as true:
Always it is by bridges that we live.

The human bridge is neglected to the background, and what is focused upon with an intense, celebratory lyricism is the immeasurable positive significance of a bridge as a symbol of the idea of social, economic, political and cultural intermediation and interaction in human life. It may not be carrying things too far to point out here that the symbolic value of the concept of "bridge" is also directly relevant to Larkin's theory of poetry as postulated in his famous essay "The Pleasure Principle." Larkin begins this essay by enumerating the "three stages" of poetic composition:

"The first is when a man becomes obsessed with an emotional concept to such a degree that he is compelled to do something about it. What he does in the second stage, namely, construct a verbal device that will reproduce his emotional concept in

anyone who cares to read it, anywhere anytime. The third stage is the recurrent situation of people in different times and places setting off the device and re-creating in themselves what the poet felt when he wrote it."

Thus it came about that Larkin did not go the whole hog in carrying out the aims of the movement because he could never completely cast off the symbolist or the modernist influence. He stands with Kingsley Amis and Donald Davie as a leading member of this group of poets; but he is the one illustrious poet whose work also illustrates, in many of his poems, the features of the symbolist and modernist mode of writing of which W.B.Yeats, T.S.Eliot and Ezra Pound are the chief representatives. While consciously carrying out the aims of the movement, Larkin yet adopts most of the methods and strategies of the modernists and symbolists like W.B.Yeats and Ezra Pound. His participation in the movement is a clear, distinct and undeniable fact, but this participation has been diluted or modified by the symbolist or Yeatsian mode of writing. Motion says:

[have] very little anecdote or narrative....They contain nothing about arriving in a new place, nothing precise about the local landscape, nothing detailed about Ruth, nothing about Larkin's lodgings or his work. Occasionally there are indications that some art of struggle is taking place between.....fancy rhetoric and everyday circumstances- but on the whole Larkin is happy to surrender his interest in the quotidian, and settle instead for the misty imaginative world he had derived from Yeats. (Motion, 126)

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