
Note of Alienation in the Poetry of Philip Larkin

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Abstract

In the general sense ‘alienation’ is used to characterize the feeling of ‘non-belonging’, exclusion and loneliness seen to be typical of the modernist vision. It has become a major theme in many a contemporary writing. The alienated protagonist is a recurrent figure in the poetry of Philip Larkin who is a representative British poet during the second half of the 20th century. Larkin portrayed in his poetry the existential predicament of the British society just immediately after the Second World War. The existential predicament caused in the lives of the Western people by the rootlessness is the outcome of war. The present essay attempts to illustrate some of Philip Larkin’s poetry from this perspective.

Keywords: *Existence, Loneliness, Emptiness, Oblivion, Death*

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Introduction

Characteristic of much of Larkin's poetry is his insight into the lives of the individuals trapped within an unsatisfactory and unsatisfying situation (Day 10). Often he meditates on a vision outside his window. Consequently, it places him in the position of an artist who is isolated and separated from life which remains outside the window, while he in turn observes it from a detached position rather than participating in it. This gesture inculcates in the poet a willed solitude which is necessary for the creation of art. As Larkin himself remarked, the phenomenon of creating art out of pain is by no means unusual. He observes that for him unhappiness 'provokes a poem' (*Required Writing* 47). Naturally he wrote about failure as a common human experience (Rossen 23).

That Larkin's general sense of frustration and alienation from the outside world is evident in a cartoon which he drew during his early years of life. The cartoon, "Portrait of the Author and Family 1939", pictures the members of the artist's family: his father, mother and sister are talking about various matters while facing one another. They are also engaged in other preoccupations: the father is reading a newspaper, the mother is knitting, the sister is standing facing them, gesturing with one hand. The most striking is that the figure of the young artist is sitting completely outside the circle. He is writing at a desk with one hand while looking up. His face is turned toward the viewer, suffused with dark emotion, while a huge wordless exclamation point hovers over his head (Rossen 69).

Larkin once remarked in an interview to Miriam Gross that 'Deprivation is for me what daffodils were for Wordsworth'. His sense of deprivation perhaps occurs because of his inability to find faith and affinity in nature. He chose deprivation as stimulating and was inventive with it. This deprivation of friendship, childhood freedom and above all love is pivotal in many of Larkin's poems. Besides, Larkin's stammering kept him away from developing friendship with many people (Rossen 38).

Nature imagery recurs often in *The North Ship*. In his early poems Larkin depicts nature as cold and as in powerful motion. It has become a powerful setting for the poet to reflect his own emotional state, in which he is alienated from nature. Let us discuss some short poems from *The North Ship*. In "Dawn" the speaker wakes to 'hear a cock /Out of the distance crying, and to look out of the window and 'see the clouds flying' (*CP* 284). These events in nature give expression of his own experience of loneliness: "How strange it is / For the heart to be loveless, and as cold as these" (*CP* 284). Though the external world shows its preparedness to welcome a new day, the speaker fails to respond to it because the 'cold' and 'loveless' reality pulls him back. It is striking to note that the cock is 'crying' not 'crowing', an auditory image suggesting the speaker's desolation. The visual image of 'clouds flying' may be associated with the aimlessness or perturbed movement and isolation. So both these images suit the speaker's mood of depression and alienation (Chatterjee 56).

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The consciousness of nature works in a similar way in 'Ugly Sister' (Rossen 28). Here the ugliness of the speaker, a lady, prevents her from being loved. As a result, she is left to live a life of abject loneliness. She struggles to overcome the loneliness partly by taking recourse to the world of music and partly by adopting a philosophical stance to the objects of nature (Chatterjee, 72, 73). The picture of loneliness that is evoked in the first stanza is rather decaying. The way the speaker presents the sequence of her activities after day's work shows that she is extremely bored and that her life even at home is only a course of drudgery. The speaker's consciousness of the drabness of life makes the second stanza seem to have been uttered with a deep sigh of helplessness and self-pity. The lady considers the solitary contemplation of the elemental presences less as an effective antidote to, than as an inextricable attribute and an inevitable anchorage of, loneliness. And while it is too much to claim, as Andrew Swarbrick so emphatically does, that the poem 'summarises the conditions which *The North Ship* poems elaborate', it can certainly be acknowledged that the poem offers the briskest, most delicate and most succinct articulation of the state of loneliness and of profound melancholy that accompanies such a state (Chatterjee 73). The title suggests that the 'Ugly Sister' is a hermit-like creature, possibly an outcast, and she becomes one of the first of Larkin's protagonists to take refuge from society in this way (Rossen 28).

Larkin's melancholy compounded with sentimentality finds expression in 'Kick up the fire' (Chatterjee 57). The speaker strives to keep his evening guest, possibly his beloved, in his rooms. Accordingly, he 'drives the shadows back' and 'prolongs his talk on this or that excuse' till 'two o'clock' at night (CP 285). The poem vividly describes the terror of loneliness, the guest's departure into the outside world causes figurative death, and brings 'instantaneous grief' of loneliness and a feeling of 'dumb idleness' overpowers the speaker: 'Who can confront/The instantaneous grief of being alone?' (Rossen 28, 29) The lyric gives lugubrious expression to the speaker's feelings of grief and 'dumb idleness' growing from his sudden and acute awareness of 'being alone' (Chatterjee 57).

In Larkin's poetry one of his prominent obsessions is alienation which in association with the theme of death makes him a representative of postwar British poet. The centrality of alienation in Larkin's poetry is evident in many poems of his second volume of verse, *The Less Deceived* (1955). Commenting on "Absences" Larkin wrote: 'I am always thrilled by the thought of what places look like when I am not there' (Swarbrick 67). Though the poet is physically present in the place, he is totally unaware of his presence. In this self-oblivion state he is able to see what the place is looking like. The poem presents a scene of stormy seascape. No ships or coasts are visible. Here is only a horizon and a sky 'yet more shoreless' in which clouds are gathered and unravelled. The only presences are of the elemental forces: water, sky, light and wind, constantly transforming themselves. The sea is tilting and sighing, the clouds riddled, shifting and sifting. The entire poem is completely

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absorbed in this scene (Swarbrick 68). Standing aloof from the entire poem the final, isolated line completes a radical process of transcendence – from sea to attics to absence itself: “Such attics cleared of me! Such absences”(C P 49). “Absences” goes beyond the desire of oblivion and here the poet succeeds in negating himself. He does not seek any transcendence himself. Rather the change in nature infuses in the poet a sublime longing for the attainment of an ultimate transformation – from an awareness of his presence to a state of absence from it through the obliteration of the self, from the bondage of ego to the ecstatic deliverance from it (Chatterjee 155). The dwindling stanza-pattern of the poem – from six-line to three-line and finally one line – seems to capture the annihilation of the self ‘as though the poem itself were fading into the oblivion it speaks of’ (Kuby 146).

In “Wants” the speaker is seeking for nothingness. Beneath all our social engagements lies the desire for oblivion. Even though the pretended anxieties resulting from the calendar showing social obligations, the life insurance as a protection against death, the printed instructions of the sex manuals for indulging in sex, the family is photographed under the flag-pole for perpetuating the memory of family relationships, the fearful turning away from death -- underneath all these activities there lies the desire to be alone. It seems that the poem’s insipid ‘refrains toll the knell of gloomy nihilism’: ‘Beyond all this, the wish to be alone . . . Beneath it all, desire of oblivion runs’ (Swarbrick 60). In spite of all the superficial attractions of life what we most hanker after is solitude (‘the wish to be alone’) and finally extinction of our being or existence (‘desire of oblivion runs’). Social customs cannot evade the fundamental human wish ‘not to exist’. Disgusted with the ritualistic pattern of life the speaker ‘wants’ to be excluded and longs for death. Death itself is the ultimate form of alienation from all kinds of social engagements.

“At Grass” is Larkin’s another poem about oblivion, but here the poet dealt the issue much more maturely than the latent self-pity of “Wants” (Swarbrick, 62). The two retired racehorses, of which ‘one crops grass, and moves about’ while the other seems to look on, shelter now in the ‘cold shade’. By slipping their names they have now become ‘anonymous’. The horses relish their ‘memories’ of glorious achievement and nostalgia as much as they enjoy the state of oblivion. Here the distance between the poet and retired race-horses is notable. The horses are also distanced by time, space and fame : “Almanacked, their names live; they/ Have slipped their names, and stand at ease’ (C P 29,30). According to Stan Smith, distance is a recurring and complex concept in Larkin’s poetry and “At Grass” is its telling illustration. Standing outside the drama of their lives (they are ‘fifteen years’ on from the races) and escaping all human contact (‘And not a fieldglass sees them home’) the horses embrace anonymity and wait for their end. Leaving behind their identities horses seem to fading into death.

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‘Going’ is about the approach of death which destroys our consciousness and then alienates us from our earthly existence. Death is considered here as an evening spreading over the fields, an unusual experience that does not cheer. Death looks comforting from the distance, but when it comes close, it brings no comfort but dread. The singularity of the evening in “Going” makes it a threatening symbol of death. Death was an obsessive feeling that loaded Larkin’s heart with alienation. In “Going” what is ‘coming in’ is death which for the speaker is a comfortless blank (Chatterjee, 163). Larkin imagines here what happens to a man at the point of death. At that moment, perhaps, our senses and other faculties start failing, and we cannot realize what is, or is happening, around us: ‘What is under my hands, / That I cannot feel? / What loads my hands down?’ (C P 3). All that we feel is some kind of an uneasy load on us. This feeling of fright surrounds the poem from beginning to end. “Going” ‘is a ‘symbolist evocation of mortal dread, of emptiness and impotence’ (Swarbrick 32). Andrew Motion also writes in a similar vein when he says ‘Dread overcoming desire, emptiness swallowing fulfillment, sexual anxiety converting into fear of mortality’ produced ‘Going’ (Motion 137).

The Whitsun Weddings which was published in 1964 reveal the poet’s sense alienation more explicitly than his previous volume. ‘Mr Bleany’ is about an unlucky bachelor whose life marked by loneliness and rootlessness. P.R .King regards the poem as an ‘invocation of a dull, dispirited bachelor life’ (King 18). Mr Bleany whose very name suggests ‘bleakness’ and ‘meagreness’ was the previous tenant of a scantily furnished room which the speaker is now going to occupy. Bleany’s featureless room has become identical with the emptiness of his life as well as his attitude towards existence. His life is so passive that it is ‘like a death-in –life’ as the landlady commented that Bleany had lived in her house until ‘They moved him’ (Timms 98). The landlady’s straightforward detailing of the dreary lodging tells us a good deal about what sort of man Bleany was: ‘That how we live measures our own nature’. The ‘flowered curtains’ are short of adequate length –‘thin and frayed,/Fall to within five inches of the sill’(CP 102). The bareness and drabness of Bleany’s life is suggested by his use of ‘saucer-souvenir’ as an ash-tray, the ‘fusty’ bed, ‘sixty-watt’ bulb, ‘no hook/ Behind the door, no room for books or bags-’. Bleany’s static, alienated interior is contrasted with the moving exterior: ‘But if he stood and watched the frigid wind/ Tousling the clouds’(C P 102). That Bleany played the football pools without ever winning and spent his summer holidays with ‘the ‘Frinton folk’ at the same resort and Christmas passed always with his sister in Stoke expose a life of monotonous regularity, a habit of foolish expectancy and above all, loneliness. The lonely bachelor speaker, who eventually becomes Bleany’s double, cannot help thinking that he is like the previous tenant in many respects: ‘I lie/ Where Mr Bleany lay, and stub my fags/ On the same saucer-souvenir’. Bleany lives

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an ordinary and tedious life, which is characterized by ‘the low-keyed existence of a modern lower-middle class individual, a victim of alienation’ (Chatterjee 205).

‘Dockery and Son’ reflects on the relative value of bachelorhood and marriage, isolation and community. The occasion of the poem is a bachelor speaker’s visit to his former Oxford college where his junior contemporary Dockery has a son who is studying there. On his return journey he meditates about Dockery’s married state and his childless, wifeless state, and watches his past receding back. He is disconnected from his previous life not only by the ‘locked’ door of the room where he used to live but by the indifferent lawn which was once familiar to him but is now ‘dazzlingly wide’ and by the chiming bell. He is an outsider not only in his previous college but also from his past. He no longer belongs in his former life. The temporal distance between his past and present as well as the gap between himself and Dockery who married at an early age is carried through in the imagery of the railway tracks that move him further and further away: ‘the ranged/ Joining and parting lines reflect a strong/Unhindered moon’(King 12). The speaker’s nostalgia creates in him a sense of exclusion and alienation: ‘For Dockery a son, for me nothing’ (C P 153). He contemplates how young Dockery must have been when he became a father. Dockery decided to get married and have children while the speaker remained single. ‘In having children Dockery acted on the false premise that ‘adding meant increase’ whereas to the speaker it means ‘dilution’. The speaker says that such choices are not ‘Innate’ but ‘more a style/ Our lives bring with them’. The last stanza is dominated by the speaker’s fear of death: ‘Life is first boredom, then fear./ Whether or not we use it, it goes’, (C P 153). It is also echoed in the first stanza by the phrase ‘Death-suited, visitant’. Roger Day declares that ‘Death-suited’ may suggest that ‘death suits him’ (Day 55). The choices of marriage and celibacy not are our own but ‘What something hidden from us chose’ and this ‘something’ at last will leave us ‘age, and the only end of age’(C P,153).

High Windows (1974) culminates Larkin’s achievement as a poet and makes him a national celebrity. According to Andrew Motion, ‘*The Less Deceived* made his name; *The Whitsun Weddings* made him famous; *High Windows* turned him into a national monument’ (Motion 446). In *High Windows* Larkin focuses the burning issues of his contemporary society like its morbid obsession with money, alienation and sexual permissiveness (Chatterjee, 248). ‘The Old Fools’ is based on the horror of ageing. The poet’s disgust is not directed at the senile decay but at the alienating condition of human being in old age. The poet gives an account of how the old people lose their identity and self-awareness when decrepitude overpowers them: ‘Not knowing how, not hearing who, the power/ Of choosing gone’ (C P 196). This is frightening because dissolving identity and losing self-awareness is an indication of the final oblivion of self: ‘At death, you break up: the bits that were you/ Start speeding away from each other for ever/ With no one to see. It’s only oblivion’ (C P 196). Old

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age is described as ‘An air of baffled absence, trying to be there/ Yet being here’. Here loneliness is embodied in the senility of geriatric people. The contemptuous term ‘the old fools’ has become towards the end of the poem an expression of compassion as suggested by the personal pronoun ‘we’ in the final comment of the poem: ‘We shall find out’. It is as though the shared fate of humanity to face the chilling climax of life or the inevitability of death.

‘Aubade’ published in *Times Literary Supplement* on 23rd December, 1977 is not a ‘dawn song’ but a ‘death poem’. The dawn comes to the speaker as a shocking reminder of the extinction of his physical existence: ‘the dread/ Of dying, and being dead,/ Flashes afresh to hold and horrify’ (C P 208). The speaker not only fears dying but also fears being alienated from the world. The idea of death is not so much frightening as is the idea of nothingness and total emptiness of life: ‘But at the total emptiness for ever,/ The sure extinction that we travel to/ And shall be lost in always. Not be here,/ Not to be anywhere,/ And soon; nothing more terrible, nothing more true’ (C P 208). The speaker is so intensely engrossed in the notion of alienation that his ‘mind blanks’ at the thought of ‘Unresting death’. The first four stanzas present death as the extreme form of alienation typically exemplified by the following imagery: ‘... no sight, no sound,/ No touch or taste or smell, nothing to think with,/ Nothing to love or link with,/ The anaesthetic from which none come round’ (C P 208). But in the fifth stanza added more than three years later to the first four stanzas the speaker’s tone has been changed, death is not as appalling as in the previous stanzas: ‘Slowly light strengthens, and the room takes shape.’ His frustration has been turned into a positive feeling: ‘Work has to be done./ Postmen like doctors go from house to house’ (C P 209). Postmen and doctors sustain life by defying death – postmen by communicating between individuals and doctors by curing the sick. ‘The image’, Anthony Thwaite declares, ‘is one of healing, of renewal...’ (S L xi).

The characteristics of the poems explained individually here show prominently that alienation and death are the unignorable themes in Larkin’s poetry. Larkin’s sense of alienation can be easily perceived by the close examination of his presence and the roles played by him in many of his poems as is explained here. The images that the poet creates in his poems show his psychological dissociation from the rest of the world. That the poet is in a “condition of aloneness which is identical with oblivion” is suggested by many of his poems in all his three collections of poetry.

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