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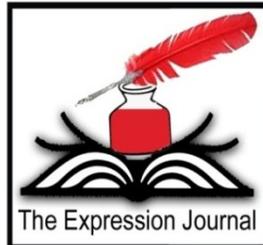
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PHILIP LARKIN'S POETRY IS NOTHING BUT 'POETRY OF GREAT EMOTION AND LOVE': AN APPRAISAL

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Abstract

This article throws light on Philip Larkin's poetry of great emotion and love and how he became the prominent and leading voice of his generation, whose poetry is focused on personal emotion but avoids sentimentality and underlying obsession with universal themes of mortality and love and also shows how he explains love as the supreme illusion of man, who cannot restrain of craving for love which causes more troubles. Larkin's view strongly stands on twisting of reality to suit the purpose of living. In this paper few poems have been analyzed from different poetry collections by Philip Larkin. His first collection of poems titled *The North Ship* (1945) enumerates and commemorates a budding poet of twenty-four year old writing under the spell of W.B. Yeats and a select band of few other poets. *The North Ship* is replete with poems about time's effect on man, love's failure, solitariness, death and other themes later developed in successive volumes of poetry like *The Less Deceived*, *The Whitsun Weddings* and *High Windows*. These poems are the focus of this research paper.

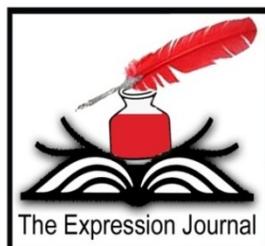
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Philip Larkin has been considered by some critics as a true representative of Movement poetry. In his verse, one can perceive “a sympathy with the different that is lacking in the work of many of his movement contemporaries” (Timms 20). His writing is nothing but “a direct and personal response to particular experiences” and he has never withdrawn from facing “the great theme on principle, nor the heightened diction that is often necessary for its statement” (P 20). He doesn't suffer from the narcissistic love which leads movement poets to spray their poems with words like “poem” and “poetry”. Larkin's verse possesses a permanence sadly missing in other poets of the group. Technically too, he is far superior to the rest and his rare ability in describing people, places and events with an accompanying keen sense of economy, places him in a class of his own. He was the most talented poet of those who wrote for *New Lines* and has been regarded by Ian Hamilton as

“the poet whose contribution to *New Lines* seems to me to have any lasting potency; at one level, it could be said that Philip Larkin's poems provide a precise model for what the movement was supposed to be seeking. But having noted his lucidity, his debunkery ... and other such lyrical” attributes, one would still be left with the different and deeper task of describing the quality of his peculiar genius, the task of talking about poems rather than postures” (P 73).

Larkin's first collection of poems namely *The North Ship* (1945) represents the work of a twenty-four year old poet writing under the spell of W.B.Yeats and a select band of other poets. *The North Ship* is replete with poems about time's effect on man, love's failure, solitariness, death and other themes later developed in successive volumes of poetry like *The Less Deceived*, *The Whitsun Weddings* and *High Windows*. Like Jose Hierro, Philip Larkin too is “a poet of compassion” (Cohen 248) and his poetry is “distinct” in the way Edward Thomas's is – from all the verse which might

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be thought to be like it. How distinct and superior” (Enright 141). What pinpoints his poetic personality is “perhaps a piercing resonance of feeling which reveals a melancholy sensibility as keen as Tennyson’s and as tough as Hardy’s.” (Macbeth 261).

For Philip Larkin, ‘Love’ is “one of the supreme illusions of man, when love is present in his poems, it is something either hopelessly longed for or cynically dismissed as just another evasion of reality” (King 22). In “Faith Healing” in *The Whitsun Weddings* (P 15), man’s unrestrainable craving for love in a world beset with troubles is given prominence. The evangelist with “the deep American voice” has a pair of hands “within whose warm spring rain of loving care/each dwells some twenty seconds”. The people flock to him as he, ostensibly, has the power of healing by “Directing God about this eye, that knee” and has the ability to move them emotionally in such a man that they “reawake at kindness” and presume a heaven-gifted voice” at last calls them alone, that hands have come/To lift and lighten”. But the brilliant intensity of the blaze soon diminishes for the healing – service lacks something for complete healing. It is true that in everyone there lies dormant.

“A sense of life lived 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 loved”.

No doubt, “Faith Healing” is not about specific healing service but “Generally and movingly about the whole role – the deep and terrible necessity of love in life” (Brownjohn 16). But this service, as Larkin sees it, does not fill the vacuum formed by the absence of love. It only startles people into an awareness of “A sense of life lived according to love” or as Larkin puts it;

“Well, people want to be loved, don’t they?
The sort of unconditional love parents give
If you’re lucky, and that gets mixed up
With the love of God” (Haffenden 93).

In “Love songs in Age” in *The Whitsun Weddings* love is treated as a symbol representing escapism. The widow who accidentally finds copies of love songs she used to play and sing as a young lady is struck at first by the “hidden freshness” in them but is rapidly saddened by the realization of their uselessness and of the exaggerated hopes we pin on love. While flicking through the song books, “The glare of that much-mentioned brilliance, love/broke out to show”.

“It’s bright incipience sailing above,
Still promising to solve, and satisfy,
And set unchangeably in order. So
To pile them back, to cry,
Was hard, without lamely admitting how
It had not done so then, and could not now”.

In her youth, these songs were a source of joy but in her widowhood, being more experienced, she knows that love” is a bottomless bran-tub of promise” (Homburger 76). Love is not a panacea capable of counteracting loneliness; rather it makes the feeling of loneliness more acute. Larkin in

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“An Arundal Tomb” in (TWW 45) takes a long good look at the figures of the Earl and Countess whose hands are interlocked innocently. Tourists who throng the monument are “altered” but the couple could never have thought “to lie so long” for this masterpiece of “faithfulness” was “just a detail friends would see: / A sculptor’s sweet commissioned grace”. The monument has withstood the onslaught of time and though the couple are

“helpless in the hollow
An unarmorial age” (P 46),

Their “attitude remains”. As Larkin observes:

“Time has transfigured them into
Untruth. The stone fidelity
They hardly meant has come to be
Their final blazon, and to prove
Our almost – instinct almost true;
What will survive of us is love”.

It is not that Larkin denies the true worth of real love. What he is against is the mistaken identification of the stone’s durability with love. This is the “untruth” man has come to believe in and it is this that Larkin views as a twisting of reality to suit our purpose. No doubt, the clasped hands of the couple constitute a touching sight and to the question, ‘But did you feel skeptical about the faithfulness that’s preserved for us in stone?’ Larkin replied thus:

“No, I was very moved by it
I think what survives of us is love,
Whether in the simple biological sense or just
in terms of responding to life, making it happier,
even if it’s only making a joke” (Haffenden 93).

Yet, the final line of the poem “teases us out of thought towards an ideal and timeless love. But between us and such a perception are the trivialities of daily life and the instability of human existence” (Watson 359). Confronted by troubles of every imaginable kind, man strains automatically towards something imposing like the monument epitomising “fidelity”. Love will “survive” us but this thought for Larkin is “almost – instinct almost true”.

The fact that love is full of imperfections and anxieties is stressed in “If, my Darling” in *The Less Deceived*, which begins with the speaker requesting his lover “Not to Stop” at his “eyes” but to make an effort to penetrate into his inner self and understand him more deeply. She would not fail noticing that “The tantalous would not be filled, nor the fender – seat cosy”. What she could find are “Delusions that shrink to the size of a woman’s glove / Then sicken inclusively outwards” and suffer “an adhesive sense of betrayal” for she is not going to be bombarded by “the traditional lover’s protestations of deepest devotions” (King 23). But rather she will suspect the lover’s faithfulness and perhaps, withdraw from sexual union: “A Gracian statue kicked in the privates, money / A swill – tub of finer feelings”. The speaker warns his lover of possible grief when she gets to hear “how the past is past and the future neuter” and he, in fact, is aware that this piece of news “might knock” his “darling off her unpriceable pivot”. He does not commit himself nor does

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he expect her to do so. "Self's the Man" (TWW 24) is basically a comparison of the lives led by the bachelor poet and the married man, Arnold. At the outset, Larkin is emphatic that "Oh, no one can deny / That Arnold is less selfish than I". Arnold married a woman "to stop her getting away / Now she's there all day". Unselfishly, Arnold gives himself up to family and household chores. In the words of D.J. Enright, the poem is "a thinnish gloss on the niggardly proposition that marriage has so many pains that perhaps celibacy has fewer – perhaps" (P 143). Love in Arnold's life has been diluted by so many worries that his sanity is sorely tested.

"Wild Oats" (TWW 41) resembles "Self's the Man" and "If my Darling". The lover in "Talking in Bed" desires to tell the truth that but at the same time, he does not want to hurt the woman he loves. Caught between these two alternatives, he steers clear of controversial actions. "No Road" in *The Less Deceived* bears similarity to "Talking in Bed" but here the person concerned deliberately permits the relationship to crack. He cannot submit himself to it. He involves the woman in this decision and allows the "road between them." "Fall to discuss / And bricked our gates up, planted trees to screen us." The judgement is passed that gradually but certainly "time will be the stronger" and will draft "a world where no such road will run / from you to me". The boundary closes in but "Not to prevent it is my will's fulfillment / willing it, my ailment". The cause of the breakdown of communication lies with the speaker himself whose state of mind is not conducive to a permanent settlement. It is indeed "a personal ailment that in other poems is unfairly universalized as a failure in love itself" (King 25). In "Lines on a young Lady's photograph Album" (TLD 13), the poet finds it free from embarrassment, to attempt an entanglement with a young lady in a photograph, taken years ago, than try to form a relationship with the girl next to him. According to Larkin, the past "won't call on us to justify / our grief, however hard we yowl" (P 14). Later he adds that he is now left "to mourn (without a chance of consequence) / you, balanced on a bike against a fence". The phrase "without a chance of consequence" is crucial for an understanding of the poem and of Larkin's recurrent theme of the failure of love to cement the union between a man and a woman. Larkin is often found "shrinking from sexual responsibility" (Press 104). *Poem XXX* (TNS 43) is also based on a photograph of a woman. It is about someone the poet once loved.

Larkin's early poetry is flooded with a "sophisticated 'world-weary', 'The Party's over', 'Kind of view'" (Timms 30). For instance, in *Poem XXIV*, Larkin says:

Love, we must part now; do not let it be
Calamitous and bitter. In the past
There has been too much moonlight and Self-pity;
Let us have done with it".

Naturally, there is regret but it is better, so the poet argues, to part on friendly terms without an acrimonious debate on whose fault it really was. As "two tall ships, wind mastered, and with set courses voyage away from an estuary". "And waving part, and waving drop from sight", the lovers must bid goodbye without rancour. "Poem XXV" in *The North Ship* taken up the theme of love's unsuccess. The speaker mourns the fact that when morning dawns, he and his lover are strangers

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once more. Should they happen to meet, he wonders how he is going to tell her that “Last night” she came “unbidden, in a dream”. In dreams, he is still able to keep intact the bond he once shared with her. They had “worn down love good-humouredly “talking as friends” who have let passion die within their hearts”. This failure of love is all the more astonishing for the speaker and the woman as they have not met “more times than I can number on one hand”, as the man puts it.

Love often springs a surprise by popping up when least expected and sometimes creates complex situations. Timms observes:

“The theme as I have it, that it seems that we can only fully feel love towards someone when he or she has left us, would certainly suggest itself to someone writing under Hardy’s influence. That great poet’s love for his first wife, Emma Lavinia, was never felt more strongly nor expressed more poignantly than in the poems he wrote just after her death Just as for the speaker in Poem XXXII, Hardy’s love was not fully expressed until its object had been “sent ... terribly away” (P 35).

The lover in “Poem X” in *The North Ship* painfully comprehends the excruciating agony of love. He dreams his lover telling him “Let us kiss then / In this room, in this bed / we must not meet again”. Struck by this plea:

“There was no lambing – night,
No gale – driven bird
Nor frost – encircled root
As cold as my heart.”

Even in dreams, the piercing heart-wrenching nature of love is present. In “Poem XXI” (TNS 34), the man recollects a dream in which the woman he loves invites him for a “walk on the chilled shore / of a night with no memory” and then stealthily departs leaving him stranded and “empty of tears / on the edge of a bricked and streeted sea” and facing “a cold hill of stars”. The selection of words like “chilled”, “Bricked” and the phrase “cold hill of stars” emphasize the negative side-effects of love when withdrawn from a person. “Poem XIII” in *The North Ship* is on the difficulty of finding love in life:

“I put my mouth
Close to running water:
Flow north, flow south,
It will not matter,
It is not love you will find”

Similarly the wind also will not be able to find love. It will discover “only the bright-tongued birds, only a moon with no home.” The water and the wind will be defeated in their search because they “have no limbs / crying for stillness, and “have no mind / Trembling with seraphim” and “have no death to come”. Thus, on one level of interpretation, the water and the wind cannot experience love as they cannot experience death. On another level, love is depicted as something so elusive that even the elements cannot trap it successfully. Man, in Larkin’s view, has failed to do so already. Larkin is extremely cynical about love. Larkin’s suspicions about love are born from man’s immature and self-deluding romanticising of love. “It is not love that is at fault by our

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extravagant expectations and demands of it, and our failure to understand and its real nature" (Peschmann 55). But the power of love is a power to be reckoned with. In a word, what is to be commended in Larkin's poetry is that it is "a poetry of great emotion".

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