

Philip Larkin's Concept of Time as Projected in his Poetry: A Brief Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This article deeply analysis one important theme which occupies a considerable share in Philip Larkin's Poetry, the passage of time. He is obsessed with the notion of time and Larkin successfully captures deceptions of time. Time plays havoc with one's live and topples all one's future plans and aspirations. With a penetrating eye, Philip Larkin has projected his concept of time through his poetry. This paper throws light on the concept of time which is not consistently benevolent towards man

Key words: concept of time.

Philip Larkin is the most representative poet of modern times because his work reflects the absurd sensitivity of the post war era most succinctly . English poetry has never been so persistently out in the cold as it is with Larkin, a poet who rejoices not more, but less than other men in the spirit of life that is in him. He arrived at the right time, to blend in with the disenfranchised youth of the Second World War. He found no religion in churches as in ' Church - Going'; no love among men as pictured in ' faith - Healing ' ; he found his contemporaries seeking love among the ruins as in ' An Arundel Tomb'; he found nothing to romanticise to the past as in 'I remember'. Larkin's subject - matter is self - deprecation, sexual defeat and decay. He is anti-romantic and anti-rhetoric. He is honest to the core and his honesty is reflected beautifully in his poetry. He writes in a language that is not only lucid and memorable, but is natural and forceful too.

Larkin's range is drastically limited and often characterized by a passively resigned distaste for contemporary life. His is the verse of the outsider who is at once puzzled, half-pitting, half-despising the second and third -rated standards in everything that he saw around him. He found only

compromises and self - deceptions everywhere. Life is first 'boredom' he writes in 'Dockery and Son' both about himself and about life in general. What makes Larkin so lovable is that he makes the sterile world bearable; he shows that it can be borne with grace and gentleness. Unlike some of his contemporaries like Donald Barthelme, Robert Lowell, Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter, Larkin shows no hysteria, pretensions in parody, tragic grandness, savage sardonicism or sharp sincerity; he is plain and passive. He doesn't throw stones of fantasy, technical dazzle of fierce jokes at the Goliath of the Void, because he knows that they are useless. And he presents not a ' world elsewhere'. but life just here' denuded of libido, sentiment and obvious imaginative transvaluation. He is honest in the portrayal of life as it is .

Time, in the sense of opportunity, is also a great helper. Some writers have the good luck to appear at the right time. Larkin's case is an example . His poetry appeared at the right time , at the height of the anti-romantic, anti-rhetorical reaction to the inchoate poetry of the nineteen - forties. His collection of poems, ' The Less Deceived' (1995) suddenly established him as the most important of the Post war English poets. He may be insular

and traditional; then he sees nothing new anywhere worthy of new modes. One feels grateful to him for the simple reason that he has given a viable, non-expressionist body of poetry holding a lot of appeal.

One important theme which occupies a considerable share in Larkin's poetry is the passage of 'time'. Time teaches; sometimes it cheats and hurts; often it destroys. It might be said that Larkin is obsessed with the notion of time. According to P.R.King, "At the heart of Larkin's poetry lies a constant awareness of the passing of time and a belief that man is always in thrall to time, time strips us of illusions and is the bearer of realities which we would prefer to avoid" (P6). This is the function of time carried out in the role of a teacher. In addition, "there is a double cruelty in time: it both reminds us of what we might have had and turns what we have into a sense of disappointment (P7). Here, time is found to be a deceiver. Apart from this, time plays havoc with one's lives and topples all one's future plans and aspirations. Here, time is found to be in the guise of destroyer.

Philip Larkin is a poet who is very curious to ascertain and study time's influence on man from a historical perspective, i.e. the effect of certain ages of the past on men living in the present. A close analysis of Larkin's poems would reveal the fact that most of his poems lay focus on the deceiving and destroying capabilities of time. However, one can visualize some positive aspects of time in quite a number of poems. The passage of time in the form of years brings with it 'experience' which is nothing but the name given to 'lesson' one has learnt in life during the march of time. By exposing facts in front of our eyes, time constrains us to sit down and take notice. Not all Larkin's poems argue "that life and the world and time are inexorably against us: in some things that we unconsciously do or experience there may be future blessings for us or other; time may bring a positive gratuity" (Weatherhead 628). For example, "the lambs" that learn to walk in snow" in "First Sight" will in time discover." "Earth's immeasurable surprise", spring, which will bring along with it luxuriant growth in contrast to the sterile snow of winter" (TWW 36). "An Arundel Tomb" concludes that despite time's machination

as deceiver, in the case of the Earl and Countess, time has come to prove "Our almost - instinct almost true/ what will survive of us in love" (TWW 46). There is a definite hint that men "may in time reap a beauty not consciously sown" (Weatherhead 629). For the stone monument of the couple showing them with linked hands has received centuries of season wear and tear and their "attitude" has remained as "the impulse in people to make gestures like the Earl's and Countess's an impulse basic enough to be called an "almost instinct" has not altered" (Timms 6). Similarly in "Dockery and Son" (TWW 37), time educates the poet in the necessity of confessing "that our lives are ultimately controlled by powers beyond those we may influence" (King 12)

The poem "Dockery and Son" begins on a quiet note with the poet paying a visit to his college when the Dean of his college informs him of the presence in the institution of Dockery's son. Dockery was junior to the poet but, nevertheless, his contemporary. "The announcement is what leads the poet on to consider the very different ways in which individuals carve out their lives" (P12). Larkin wonders:

... to have no son, no wife,
no house or land still seemed quite
natural only a numbness registered the
shock of finding out how much had
gone of life, How widely from the others.

Earlier, at the college, he finds the door of the residence where he used to live, "locked" and takes the journey homeward feeling "ignored". His separation from the place where he spent part of life is made complete by his inability to pick out Dockery's image precisely from the cast of former collegemates. The true meaning of all that happened in the past comes to the poet after prolonged self-questioning. He understands eventually that the difference between Dockery and himself is due to "each man's innate disposition to act in a certain way" (Timms 100). Time teaches one,

"Life is first boredom, then fear.
Whether not we use it, it goes
And leaves what something hidden from
us close,
And age, and then the only end of age (P

38)

" Dockery and Son" affirms that time pass the judgements in life. Man can only be educated through experience and experience is but a child of time. In " Send No Money" (TWW 43), it is exactly this process of maturing of a man in search of truth which is described pithily:

Standing under the fobbed
Impendent belly of Time
Tell me the truth, I said,
Teach me the way things go.

His innocence at the beginning was obvious for while his friends were " itching to have a bash", he thought it would be unfair. This innocence contrasts sharply with the resounding words of the middle -age man who has learnt his truth through experience " (115) Experience has not been kind to him, but paradoxically, has transformed him into a poet who is able to look back and analyse his past with a high degree of scrupulousness. Though he often finds himself face to face with " The bestial visor, bent in .By the blows of what happened to happened", at the end of the poem one is aware that he has reconciled.

Himself to his present circumstances:

"What does it prove? Sod all.
In this way I spent youth,
Tracing the trite, untransferable
Truss- advertisement, truth.

M. L. Rosenthal points out that "the poem is a voice without a body; there is no dive into the specifics of observation and experience that would give it a body"(P 235). The criticism is unfounded for it is through "observation and experience" that the poet has come to see truth stripped of illusions and the poem tersely and exquisitely brings this view point to the forefront. And, as Timms points out, a truss could be "restricting and objectionable but its wearer is able to function better with it than without"(P 117)

Time in its march drags you away from those who are born after you. The generation gap widens and time shows you how impossible it is for you to jump into the ring with the younger generation. To think that one can bridge this gap and enjoy

with the young is to deceive oneself. Time also teaches one that the past can never return. Observing the moon in "Sad Steps" (HW 32), Larkin "rejects pretentious, literary thoughts" (Brownjohn 23) and notices how "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.

In the same manner, the photographs in "Lines on a young lady's photograph Album" (TLD 13) represent a past which "no one now can share/ no matter whose your future":

It holds you like a heaven, and you lie
Unvariably lovely there,
Smaller and clearer as the years go by (P 14)

What is so attractive about the past is that it "won't call on us to justify/ our grief" where as in the present there is always a possible aftermath to our actions. The past has invariably been a source of joy for Larkin as it stands for an actuality. This is what time has taught him and Larkin "appears to be cherishing the past because it is inviolable, because it is, paradoxically, the only thing which line of thought is "Maidan Name" (TLD 23), which converges on a common occurrence: the change of a woman's name after marriage which often leaves her maiden name unused. But in the last stanza of the poem, Larkin affirms that maiden names do have a permanence of their own. The vast expanse of time looms on the horizon and the past is seen in all its glory:

It means what we feel now about you then
How beautiful you were, and near, and
young,
So vivid, you might still be there among
Those first few days, unfinger marked again

The past is "presented as a lost Eden in maiden Name" (Weather head 624). "Church Going" (TLD 28) does examine an agonistic's reaction to a place of worship where he often pays a visit in transit although he has no abiding faith. He wonders what would happen when churches are no longer sites for prayer and traditional ceremonies. Not with standing his flippant tone in the earlier lines

of the poem, he arrives at a realization at the end that though he has no idea “what this accoutered frosty barn it in worth/ It pleases me to stand in silence here” (P 29). Time in spite of its hand in the gradual destruction of churches, literally and symbolically, has proved to him that a church is “A serious house on serious earth”. It has made him recognize the fact that “in the past the church has ministered to a perennial human need which cannot be brushed aside in a secular society” (King 33). In “Church Going”, “the timeless silence of the church and the presence of so many dead combine to displace even the most cynical and small-minded church goers, to nudge him gently to one side of himself- the self which makes cracks, the self entirely caught up in the world of compulsions” (Saga 123).

Time marches on and man’s sense of loss owes much to man’s deceiving himself than to time deceiving man. But sometimes, time hardens human feelings and the bachelor-poet in “This Be The Verse” (HW 30) after launching on a diatribe against the last two generations comes to the ominous conclusion:

Man hands on misery to man
It deepens like a coastal shelf.
Get out as early as you can.
And don’t have any kids yourself.

Time is not consistently benevolent towards man. Like a talented actor, it can act in a variety of roles. Time as a deceiver makes its presence felt in many of Larkin’s poems. Time is shown to be “a chain that binds us to our earlier hopes and dreams which, as we grow older, we realize will never become reality”, and it is this “sense of loss, of hopes blasted and ideals destroyed” (King 6), that is seen in Larkin’s poetry. For instance, “Triple Time” (TLD 35), juxtaposes the present with the future and the present with the past. For Larkin, the present represents “A time traditionally soured/A time unrecommended by event”. Empty and “to blandness scoured”, this is the time in which “no important or meaningful occurrence may be anticipated to add significance to our dreary existence” (King 7). Yet what makes it more painful to stomach is that this dull present was once a time thought of as a heavy future:

This is the future furthest childhood saw
Between long hours, under travelling
skies,
Heard in contending bells-
An air lambent with adult enterprise.

But when this present fades into the past, one shall be confronted with “A valley cropped by fat neglected chances/ that we insensately forbore to fleece”. When lost opportunities stare at us, another illusion nurtured by time will be brought into the open. Looking back, “on this we blame our last/ Threadbare perspectives, seasoned decrease”. These concluding lines seem to possess “an air of inevitability in their insinuation of a seasonal cyclical decline and combine with the previous image to insist that life is a series of missed chances and that our present opportunities will pass untaken before we are even aware of their existence” (King 8). The poem successfully captures deceptions of time.

Larkin’s theory of time is a complete contrast to Eliot’s:

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future
And time future contained in time past (P
13)

Apart from this, we are, as Larkin says, in “Next, Please”, (TLD 20)

“Always too eager for the future,
We pick up bad habits of expectancy,
Something is always approaching; every
day Till then we say”

Standing on a cliff, we can see and catch sight of “the tiny, clear/sparkling armada of promises draw near”. The lethargic speed with which they move irks us for we nourish hopes of a rewarding future. Unfortunately such hopes are destined to be shattered because the “sparkling armada” never anchors. Instead, what we are forced to see is that “it’s/No sooner present than it turns to past”. And we are left bewildered “holding wretched stalks/ of disappointment”. But we try clinging on desperately to our wishful thinking and we feel confidently we deserve a better deal “But We are wrong”. Time deceives us into believing that we are capable of transcending reality-a reality which time itself supports in its

endless journey. "Arrivals, Departures" (TLD 44), a poem which, according to Barbara Everett, "reads like a beautiful imitation in the same technical sense, of Baudelaire's prose-poem *le Port*" (Everett 236) resembles "Next, Please" in that it also "develops a comment on time and the frustration of our expectations" (King 10) by using ships metaphorically "The Old Fools" (HW 19) shows "the middle-aged man's growing sense of time running out and his angry and bitter recognition that life can end ina cruel and undignified way" (King 39). One can see how time relentlessly drives old men into oblivion and what shakes the poet from his composure is that these old men are not aware of their own plight. Under the books of time, strangely enough, the fools aren't "screaming" but their faces "show that they're for it".

"Time's eroding agents" and "coarse, sand-laden wind, time" are phrases apt to mark the "active" destruction carried out by time. Another of Larkin's themes connected with time is history. In the words of John Wain, Larkin resembles Arnold Bennett in that he too has a "compassionate sense of the ordinary human being trapped within time and to his perception that a historical epoch is rested in individual human lives more than in stone or paint or clay or printed words" (Wain 166). "How Distant" (HW 31) deals with immigration. It is a historical poem which reveals an era which Larkin can only look at with nostalgic eyes. It is about a time when there was no strict immigration rules to hamper free travel and a time when undefiled land was for the talking and men built colonies wherever the soil was fertile. "MCUXIV" (TWW 28) is another poem based on history and it requires a historical perspective to understand what provokes such genuinely touching sentiments in Larkin. Here Larkin intends to write a panegyric to those killed in the First World War; the war fought to "end wars". The poem "powerfully and poignantly creates the sense of an historical moment, poised between peace and war, arrested and held for an inspection that is solemn with after knowledge" (Lodge 214). The historical background is brilliantly word-painted:

The farthings and sovereigns,
And dark-clothed children at play
Called after kings and queens.

Another historical poem is "The Explosion" (HW 42). It is centred around a mining disaster, an occurrence that could no doubt take place in any age but "the Universality is not diluted by the fact that the poem evidently refers to a world that has now passed away" (Wain 167). Thus, with a penetrating eye, Philip Larkin has projected his concept of Time in his poetry.

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