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REALISTIC CADENCE IN LARKIN'S POETRY

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ABSTRACT

The Movement poetry aims at downright realism. The wide-ranging attitudes of the people and the writers during the time were anti-romantic and anti-imperialistic. The sudden crumple of British Imperialism to a third rate power, disillusioned and disenchanted the entire population of England. The standard of English people became very low and commercial consumerism prevailed in English society. Larkin was committed to a realistic portrayal of life and the actual condition of life in England. Therefore, his poems were very critical and realistic at the same time. His response to life and experience is distinguished by novelty and by poetic sincerity. Larkin himself brings out the way in which his poems acquire their basic impulse from his natural feelings about ordinary life. He inscribes sincerely about whatever happens to arouse and hold his interest. This paper aims to show how Larkin draws the material of his poetry from the casual experience that comes across in his everyday life and everyday reality.

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INTRODUCTION

Philip Larkin himself has said: "I write poems to preserve things I have seen / thought / felt both for myself and for others, though I feel that my prime responsibility is to the experience itself, which I am trying to keep from oblivion for its own sake" (RW 79). Although there is a symbolist bend in the poetry of Larkin, he is wedded to ground realities. His demand for fidelity to experience is supported by his insistence that poetry should both converse and provide delight to the reader. It is the authenticity to experience that enables the poet to communicate. He speaks of Hardy having given him "a sense of relief that I didn't have to try and jack myself up to a concept of poetry that lay outside my own life" (RW 175). It is Hardy who taught him that a modern poet could write about the life around him in the language of the society around him. This persuaded him to make use of his poetry to examine the reality of his own life -- a provision that led him to the view that "poetry is an affair of sanity, of seeing things as they are" (368). Much of Larkin's descriptive poetry about England is written from the point of an impassive observer. He shows an incessant propensity to consider what the country might look like to a tourist. The well-applauded poem "The Whitsun Weddings" (CP 114) is concerned with the speaker's surveillance during his journey to London, of wedding parties boarding the train at different stations.

A casual spectacle from a train window becomes elegant poetry in the hands of Larkin. This situation is archetypal Larkin -- because most of his poems germinate on journeys. His insensitivity by sticking to the role of a passenger does not mean that he is unmoved; rather, it gives him a private space to see things as they are.

The first two stanzas are a triumphant evocation not only of a train journey, but of a comprehensive panorama of English rural and city landscapes. The Whitsuntide heat, the holiday vibes, the sights, and smells of a hot afternoon journey -- even the reek of the hot carriage cushions -- are circumscribed in a series of snapshot details taken from the train window. The readers set in motion along with the movement of the train when the scene flows from "The backs of houses," "a street / Of blinding windscreens" and the smell of the fish-dock in the city through the "level drifting breadth" of Lincolnshire farmland, to the "Canals with floatings of industrial froth" (CP 114). The poem also encapsulates the variety of English landscape, from the terraced housing, suburbs and industrial buildings of old cities, the featureless faces of new towns ("approached with acres of dismantled cars") with their own remarkable English life ("An Odeon went past, a cooling tower, / And someone running upto bowl"), to the farms of rural England. In the third stanza, the observer is caught by the presence of the wedding parties on several station platforms, which are gathered to see off the newly married couples. The attitudes and outlooks of younger sisters and girlfriends of the

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bride are dexterously drafted in -- their concoction of sharing the bride's happiness and the anticipations of their own marriages -- along with the innocent but clumsy attempts to look fashionable in such an occasion. Similarly, the fathers' genial endeavors to make things go with a swing, the mothers' contented shrieks of joy and the uncle's smutty jokes are depicted in the next stanza. Since the wedding is celebrated by unreflecting working class people and enjoyed in drab surroundings, the whole scene appears shoddy and second rate, and it is, in fact, an attempt from the part of the poet to show things as they really are. This poem may be read as dealing with English Society as a whole through its panorama of scenes and the couples suggest the recurring life of a whole community.

Larkin's "Church Going" (CP 97) is almost realistic in every detail. This poem portrays the degeneration of religious assurance and dwindling in the number of people attending church services after 1945 (the year of the end of World War II). In 1950s the rate of devotees who visited churches was below ten percentage. This collapse of faith is brilliantly photographed in this poem along with the pictorial description of the interior of the church. Inside the church, the speaker catch sight of the matting on the floor, the seats, and a number of Bibles:

Once I am sure there's nothing going on
I step inside, letting the door thud shut
Another church: matting, seats, and stone,
And little books; sprawlings of flowers, cut
For Sunday, brownish now, some brass and stuff
Up at the holy end, the small neat organ
And a tense, musty, unignorable silence
Brewed God knows how long. Hatless, I take off
My cycle-clips in awkward reverence. (CP 97)

The poet projects an image of the post-war welfare state Englishman in the last two lines. He is the icon of a shabby Englishman who is least concerned with his appearance and is poor, having a cycle or a bike not a car; who is uncouth but full of agnostic piety. He is under-fed, under-paid, over-taxed, desperate, bored, and cynical. The significance of the poem is that it stunningly recapitulates the basic dilemma of an age. In "Ambulances" (CP 132), 'death' is anticipated in an urban context. Larkin restores a true scale of values to us, "for a second," we "get it whole," our death seems real to us again, our present lives almost irrelevant. In the poem we have a vivid and realistic picture of an ambulance stopping outside a house in order to pick up a critically sick-man and transport him to a hospital. Ambulances dashing on the roads are a common sight in the streets of all modern cities. Their sights captivate the attention of passerbies, by its desolate and poignant manifestation.

When an ambulance passes the street, the children of the neighborhood gather to see it from the pavements, and women who return from shopping also watch the sick-man with a bloodless face being carried into the ambulance on a stretcher.

Then children strewn on steps or road,
Or women coming from the shops
Past smells of different dinners, see
A wild white face that overtops

Red stretcher-blankets momentarily
As it is carried in and stowed. (CP 132)

The sight of the ambulance induces the thought of bereavement and death in the minds of the spectators. The men, women, and children on the road foresee their own fatal end when they notice a seriously ailing man carried to the hospital. It is again true that in modern times quite often ambulances simulate as confessional rooms where a priest receives confession from a sinner.

The poet has not only succeeded in portraying the pictorial particulars of the ambulance travelling on a city road but also, described the mental state of the patient inside it. He sensing his imminent end has lost all consciousness within the tomblike ambiance of the ambulance. He is isolated from his dear and near ones. In his psyche there is nothing left of his affable prior experiences of family and societal life. An incredibly genuine picture of both the inner recesses and the outer surface of the world are successfully drawn here. Such a realistic picture is again depicted in the poem "High Windows" (CP 165). The opening lines are of the same kind, they contain a picture of a young man and a young girl making love to each other:

When I see a couple of kids
And guess he's fucking her and she's
Taking pills or wearing a diaphragm
I know this is paradise. (CP 165)

The poem insinuates an insight into the sexual behavior of modern young men and women. As England turned out to be a permissive society, there were ambivalent perspectives on morality. Almost all marriages were love marriages and the young populace discarded all responsibilities towards their families. They considered prevailing old customs and fundamental traditions quite useless. The poem can be taken as a historical document on telling the truth about life as it was during the time.

Larkin's newsreel watching resulted in "At Grass" (CP 29). It not only goes back into the racehorses' careers, to evoke their championships and fame, but speculates on their psyche and feelings at present. Larkin's horses, unlike as in "A Dream of Horses" by Ted Hughes, do not have any quixotic, quasi-medieval paraphernalia, nor are they cryptograms for ferocity or violence of the corporal world. Rather they are social creatures that form an inevitable part of the English scene, part-pastoral, part- sporting. This is a poem about a group of retired race-horses who had been triumphant in the racing contests in the past. Now the horses are too old to participate in any contests. An onlooker watching these horses eating grass meditates on their past glory. Large crowds of people including dandy women holding parasols attended the races. Many of them had staked their money on the horses of their choice. Larkin even describes the motor-cars parked outside the enclosure in the hot sun by the people who had gathered to watch the races. At the beginning of each race, the crowds were filled with great exhilaration, and they often screamed to convey their support for the horses on which they had gambled their money. For an ordinary reader, this poem fails to have much of an appeal. However, it was very popular in England immediately after its publication. It is said that one afternoon

Larkin went to see a film, and before the start of the actual film, watched a short film at the same theatre about a renowned race-horse which had been famous before the war. The poem also insinuates at the social condition of Britain during that era. These horses were quite famous and were given a legendary stance in their own time but due to economic depression, as the horse races had fallen out of favor, they were doomed to oblivion. The poet hints at the horse races, which had once been a part of the history and glory of the British Empire.

There occur rare instances where reading can as easily inspire such speculation as can seeing something pictorial. The poem "Deceptions" (CP 32) comprises ample substantiation of the power of the printed word -- here a single sentence from Mathew Mayhew's *London Labour and London Poor* (1861) set the poet to work. Usually for Larkin, though it is the visual image that provokes his poetic muse, the speaker and the woman referred to in this poem have a factual subsistence. It has been written in rejoinder to Mayhew's account of a raped girl who had been dragged and outraged in 19th century England. Here Larkin exhibits the landscape in the backdrop as mere plain and real and weighs no symbolic overtones as in the former. It is just a natural setting for the human presence and even though the tone of the poem is informal, flat, and matter-of-fact, it is typical of the movement procedures. As most of his poems, it not only shows but also tells. Larkin portrays the unsympathetic city and is rational in his evaluation of the human stipulation in the modern milieu: "Worry of wheels along the street outside / Where bridal London bows the other way" (CP 32). The wheels of the vehicles move vigorously since the people who drive them are too hectic with their own concerns and obsessions to bother about the wounded. The poem also exposes the miseries of the slum dwellers. Even though the closing lines are incredible, the poet has brought a unique novelty about it:

For you would hardly care
That you were less deceived, out on that bed,
Than he was, stumbling up, the breathless stair
To burst into fulfilment's desolate attic. (CP 32)

The rapist gratifies his passion, yet he fails to accomplish his contentment since sensual pleasure is not the ultimate pleasure at all. Thus along with the girl who has been deluded through this wretched event, he is also deceived by the act. The presence of the epigraph that discloses us about the rape of the woman, which was published in a London paper, brings originality to the whole affair. Larkin always tries to expose the civil defects and sham synchronized in the contemporary modern English society. Nevertheless, his sense of humor and wit alleviates his poetry from monotony. For example, in "Faith Healing" (CP 126) the visual rendering of the evangelist or the faith healer is sketched quite satirically. This poem is pictorial, since it gives a true picture of the faith healer and his followers by invoking both the physical and emotional details far beyond what the poet could see directly. The preacher in the poem stands upright. Before him, there is a long line of men and women waiting to grab his blessings for the relief of their incurable ailments. The poem has its origin in an American evangelist's frequent visits to London to cure the sick through the power of his faith in God. Larkin unbridles satire on those who claim that they possess special spiritual

powers that enable them to have direct contact with God and arrange relief for the suffering on earth. As a bona fide artist, Larkin persistently speculates on the lives and fates of those he observes. "Afternoons" (CP 121) is the offshoot of his earnest intensity with which he scrutinizes young mothers at the playground watching their children playing. The poet envisions their husbands and homes and the way in which "something is pushing them / To the side of their own lives." The poem is noteworthy for the social and economic conditions of middle class technical persons in late 1950s and early 1960s. Every Englishman was financially very sound before 1947, but after the decline of imperialism, this opulence was completely traumatized. Most of the colonies had become independent leaving no opportunities for employment of Englishman in any foreign country. Accordingly, the middle class were forced to engage in skilled trades. The mothers who gathered at the recreation ground were mostly the wives of such skilled workers. The poet's remark of these women washing their own clothes is relevant to the social milieu since they can't afford a servant.

Larkin again cites his honesty of outlook in "Nothing to be said" (CP 138). Here he writes about the un-lived life of the English provinces, the abysmal urban landscapes -- the industrial froth, vandalized posters, and synthetic finery -- the second and third-rate standards, the compromises, and self-deceptions of those he examines. He portrayed life as a futile progression towards the emptiness of death, and further shows a submissive distaste for contemporary life. Larkin is frank and honest about it and there is no "ivory tower attitude" about him. He intentionally incorporates these facts in the poem because he knows that all these are Britain's national vices:

For nations vague as weed,
For nomads among stones,
Small-statured cross-faced tribes
And cobble-close families
In mill-towns on dark mornings
Life is slow dying. (CP 138)

In this very condensed poem, Larkin has presented a very precise and pessimistic picture of modern civilization. Throughout the world, there exists depression and the humanity always shows a tendency towards self-destruction. Again, the materialistic and covetous world of middle-class social life in England becomes the background of the poem "Wants" (CP 42). The middle-class shows the tendency of socializing to a great extent than the upper and lower classes. The poet alludes to the large number of invitations, which every Englishman receives each day. He also highlights that no pleasure is derived in attending these social functions. Everything has become habitual and mechanical to the modern man -- his joy, love, family, sexual activities -- and he always yearns to remain aloof throughout his life. "I Remember, I Remember" (CP 81) and "Dockery and Son" (CP 152) are concerned with the memories of the poet's own past and they succeed in convincing the reader of his honesty to his feelings. Such an honesty is also seen in poems like "Sunny Prestatyn" (CP 149) and "Essential Beauty" (CP 144) when they describe the advertisement posters. The deliberate use of coarse language in these poems accentuates the unreality and emptiness of the whole picture. "Homage to a Government" (CP 171) speaks about the acute economic crisis England

passed between 1964 and 1967. But this is inferred in terms of the idleness and the unrest of the people. The poem, "Going" (CP 3) shows the environmental disruption going on in England and it describes the poet's apprehension that England would soon become the first slum of Europe. "Show Saturday" (CP 199) upholds the social values of the annual agricultural show with its picturesque details of the show. Larkin was fond of portraying both everyday scenes and ordinary characters in his poems. Dockery in "Dockery and Son," the evangelist in "Faith Healing," married couples and their parents in "The Whitsun Weddings," are fine examples which testify to this. He has embraced a poetic stance focusing closely and persistently on the mundane, and on the relentless and sometimes frightening features of daily existence. This response comprises both an affirmation that life is worth living, and at the same time a stubborn refusal to be deceived in people's perceptions of reality. He is predominantly concerned with the relationship between himself and his towns or landscapes, and habitually expresses a sense of communion with his surroundings in exalted or even semi-mystical terms. It is Hardy who taught Larkin "to feel, rather than to write" (RW 175). Larkin's best poems always convey the real places, people and events. They frequently begin from situations we all may experience: travelling by train, watching crowds at the seaside or local show, observing mothers in a park or young people at a party. Larkin's casually looking round an empty

church, noticing the graffiti on a poster, speculating about the previous inhabitant of a rented room -- all these give a solidity to his experiences and help the reader share in them because the mind of the poet is seen as rooted in an easily recognizable reality.

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