

Review

'Interrogating the Critical Canon'-A Deleuzean Approach to Philip Larkin

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The criticism of Philip Larkin's poetry post the poet's death in 1985 had predominantly traversed a trajectory in which the poet and his craft was deplorably subsumed in preference for the man and his vicissitudes. So pervasive was this neglect (fundamentally academic and institutionalized) that for a long time the major bulk of his poetry was consigned to oblivion. This essay is an attempt to engage with those mainstream Larkin criticisms at the level of their ideological constructs and also to open up a contemporary approach to reading practice from the Deleuzean perspective of 'Becoming'. This would provide a viable methodology for further interpretative endeavour.

Key words: Larkin, criticism, ideology, interpretation, Deleuzean, Becoming.

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INTRODUCTION

Apparently a profound and dramatic transformation of a poet's reputation in only a decade following his death may appear to be a contingent phenomenon. Philip Larkin, whose popularity as also credibility as a major poet was already established at the time of his death in 1985, had provoked adverse criticism to such an extent, that for quite some time the basis of his claim to eminence was often questioned. This derogation of poetic possibility was normally aligned to, two sources of external evidence: *Selected Letters* edited by Anthony Thwaite published in 1992 and the authorized biography by Andrew Motion *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life* in 1993.

Theorizing on the impersonality of the artistic process, T S Eliot in 'Tradition and Individual Talent' held: "The more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates" (Eliot 1920:48). However when we come to

Larkin this dictum seems almost reversed. Germaine Greer reviewing the *Collected Poems* in the 'Guardian' equated the expression of the poems with the poet's negativity when she said of Larkin: "His verse is deceptively simple, demotic, colloquial: the attitudes it expresses are also anti-intellectual, racist, sexist and rotten with class-consciousness" (Greer 1988: 27). Then followed the clichés that were to dominate so much of Larkin criticism: "sewer under the national monument" (Paulin 1992: 15), "foul-mouthed bigot" (Ackroyd 1993: 35), "dreary laureate of our provincialism" (Appleyard 1993: 27) and the like.

TRAJECTORY OF LARKIN CRITICISM

What appears interesting is that the concatenations of

metaphors employed to designate Larkin seem to be strictly in line with the Nietzschean concernment with 'perspective' as a means of structuring reality. In order to lend authority to a particular form of thought or rather style of living, Larkin scholarship sought to perspectivise reading in terms that are overtly connotative of the historical materiality of the epoch, structuring the limits of discourse in the first place. Alan Sinfield in his brilliant book *Literature, politics and culture in post-war Britain* has substantially elaborated how Fascism, Capitalism and Welfare-Capitalism were the prime ideological options available to European politics in the 1930's. Western Europe appropriated a Welfare-Capitalist economic model which strictly followed a Keynesian line of smoothing out the Capitalist cycle of boom and slump. This consensus however broke down in the mid 1970's "when capitalism went into a slump allowing a return to Pre-Keynesian economic theories and authoritarian social attitudes" (Sinfield 2007:32). Also Stuart Hall et al. in their major work *Policing the Crisis* (1978) have dealt extensively with the dissolution of consent in post-war British society leading to what they term the 'Exceptional State'. Their work specifically highlights how Britain's post-war recovery being incomplete, led to the falsification of the myths of 'affluence' and 'modernization' around which organization of consent was primarily facilitated in Britain throughout the 50's and 60's. It was the 'Caesarist' intervention of Enoch Powell, who through his 1968 'Rivers of Blood' speech, shifted the debate towards 'Authoritarianism'. The conservative party which subsequently came to power in 1970 adopted authoritarian solutions, thereby legitimizing 'Recourse to the Law' as the only means to defend hegemony in conditions of severe crisis. It was this moment as Hall et al. believes, that transformed Britain into an 'Exceptional State'. Thus evolved a general tendency to regard all threats to social order as a transgression equivalent to violence.

However this 'New Right' ideology, popularly termed 'Thatcherism' was countered by what is called 'Urban Leftism'- a defensive ploy against right wing ideologies. Ultimately when Tony Blair in 1995 spoke of 'community' the first post-socialist response to the new right was registered as a political discourse. There was a heightened desire to discover "a foundation of national life in working class or popular culture" (Barker1997:270) and also a belief that "politics had to start by listening to the mundane desires of common people" (Barker 1997:270). The revival of the ideology of community therefore stemmed from the abandonment of fraternity based on class and solidarity based on nationalism.

What bearing does this foray into British politics have in our understanding the trajectory of Larkin criticism? I believe that in view of the pervasiveness of critical unanimity among Larkin scholars most of whom happened to be academics and thus intellectual elites a

limited consent could have initially been forged around the discourse of 'authoritarianism' leading subsequently to a general acquiescence of the ideology of 'community'. Viewed from this perspective, the general dismissive stance against Larkin's poetry would undoubtedly proffer the conception of 'interpellation' (Althusser 1971:170) as a factor which probably conditioned the generation of the critical canon. For nowhere is the complicity of the subject in the process of his own domination more pronounced than in the majority of critical work centered on the reading of Larkin's poetry. The interpellated subject in the form of the reader having been structured and subjected by the aforesaid ideologies, I referred to earlier, disseminated or rather replicated the same in writing; creating reading paradigms and stereotypes in the process. The circulation of terms like 'racist', 'sexist', 'suburban', 'parochial', etc within the central canon of Larkin scholarship will substantiate my claim beyond doubt.

In fact the class belonging nature of English culture can seldom be disputed. What the English called 'High Culture' was predominantly the culture of the leisured upper middle class. Even T S Eliot in 'Notes towards a definition of Culture' upheld the same class-fixation in so far as culture was concerned. Philip Larkin, it is true, did not belong to the leisured middle class but Alan Pryce Jones editor of the 'Times literary supplement' found in 1956 that most writers irrespective of their class affiliations were co-opted within leisured middle class value structures (Sinfield 46).

The central problem of dealing with the canon of Larkin criticism is that since the publication of *Selected Letters* it appears obsessed with epistolary evidences in way of leveling charges, despite the fact that the poetic oeuvre of Larkin provides little vindication of such claims. This is particularly true of the charge of 'racism'. Critics such as Germaine Greer, Tom Paulin, Peter Ackroyd and Bryan Appleyard, oblivious of their own ideological appropriation sought to stigmatize a poet without granting him similar leverage in return. I however submit that even if this charge is partially tenable it has got to do with the 'New Right' ideology which as John Gray has pointed out "brought into conservative discourse a sectarian spirit that belongs properly not with conservatism, which is skeptical of all ideology but with the rationalist doctrines of the Enlightenment"(qtd. In Barker: 234). 'Homage To A Government' for instance, a poem highly commented upon for championing a cause ironically dubbed as 'the white man's burden' is specifically worthy of note:

Next year we are to bring the soldiers home
For lack of money and that is all right.
Places they guarded or kept orderly,
Must guard themselves, or keep themselves
orderly. (Larkin 171)

If there is racism here it is comfortably couched under the garb of colonialism. However, the connotation of the word 'orderly' being essentially culture-specific point towards the intensification of cultural orthodoxy and sectarian spirit which was a defining characteristic of new right ideology in and around the 1970s. Composed in May 1960 'MCMXIV', chews the cud of by-gone days by reminiscing about what was once traditional England:

Never such innocence
 Never before or since
 As changed itself to past
 Without a word – the men
 Leaving the gardens tidy,
 The thousands of marriages
 Lasting a little while longer
 Never such innocence again. (Larkin 127-128)

Almost the same angst informs the following lines in 'Going Going':

And that will be England gone
 The shadows, the meadows, the lakes,
 The guild halls, the carved choirs
 There'll be books, it will linger on
 In galleries: but all that remains
 For us will be concrete and tyres. (Larkin 190)

That the aforesaid passages are steeped in class-consciousness can hardly be debated and my own subject position as a post-colonial reader of Larkin's poetry is equally indisposed to salvage the English poet from the charges brought against him, when I know that much of the class-consciousness appropriated by the English was at my own peril. However, notwithstanding Larkin's ideological appropriation, an empathetic understanding of a twentieth century alienated poetic persona striving frantically to resist the incessant spate of change in and around him also needs to be registered. Furthermore this charge is also mitigated if we care to consider the subversion effected in such a poem as 'The Large Cool Store' where the divide between the working class and the leisured class is not only brought to the fore, but brought out with utmost compassion:

....To suppose
 They share that world, to think their sort is
 Matched by something in it, shows
 How separate and unearthly love is,
 Or women are, or what they do,
 Or in our young unreal wishes
 Seem to be: synthetic, new,
 And nature less in ecstasies. (Larkin 135)

Incidentally this poem was written in June, 1961 exactly a year after Larkin wrote 'MCMXIV'.

It is important to remember that beyond the absolutist position I just enumerated, an alternative reading practice primarily historicist in nature has also evolved around Philip Larkin. The problem however is that the major bulk of such critical studies as Stephen Regan observes "tends to regard history and society as background information so that the context of writing becomes a matter of secondary interest and importance" (Regan 1992:61). Now this mode of reading by being overtly deterministic appears to me as a logical extension of the same interpellated subjectivity I referred to earlier. In recent times though Larkin's poetry is being regarded more like a discourse which can transcend the simplistic mirror-like characteristic hitherto attributed to it. Commenting upon this in *Philip Larkin--The Critics Debate*, Regan maintains: "Society in this instance is not regarded as a static entity or backdrop, but as a dynamic and changing formation, a set of institutions, practices and experiences, of which poetry like all literature is an essential and valuable part" (Regan1992:61).

POETRY OF BECOMING

I would however like to focus on two particular words, 'dynamic' and 'changing' which in a way entails openness, a rupture in the assumed unity and coherence of Larkin's poetry. It is therefore time for the interpellated reader of Larkin to gravitate towards the possibility of 'Becoming'. In fact the duality of Althusser's interpellated subject anticipates that, for if interpellation subjugates individuals as passive beings, defined through the scope of scientific discourse, it also simultaneously creates the potential for autonomy and resistance by mobilizing around new identities.

If our reading of Larkin has been predominantly structured by an implicit transcendence, it is about time we can supplant it with the transience of 'Becoming'. In fact a great bulk of Larkin's poetry can be read in terms of an escape from the foundationalism of the transcendental subject into the openness of 'becoming'. From the closure of the self and its illusions, we find his poetry moving towards the impersonal, anonymous and immanent plane of experience--a plane which manifests only in difference.

There is however something immensely banal about the way we read and make sense of literature. The so called 'rational' subject in us searches for unity of perception, coherence and signification in whatever we read. This search for unity may assume diverse forms: material, psychological, historical, metaphysical etc, but what is primary as also common among these forms is that they all presuppose a unity. A first hand engagement with a short Philip Larkin poem entitled 'Going' will make the point clear and consequently enable us to open up new reading strategies. The poem goes like this:

There is an evening coming in
 Across the fields, one never seen before,
 That lights no lamps.
 Silken it seems at a distance, yet
 When it is drawn up over the knees and breast
 It brings no comfort.
 Where has the tree gone, that locked
 Earth to the sky? What is under my hands,
 That I cannot feel?
 What loads my hands down? (Larkin 3)

Apparently it seems to be a gloomy poem about the disillusionment and negativity arising out of the absence of imperial power. Alternatively some of us will also be tempted to read into the poem an existential crisis, but since such crisis is normally mediated upon by the material conditions of existence, we would readily connect it to the socio-historical specifics in which the poem was written. But suppose we de-contextualize the poem by removing both the title and the year of its composition, (which incidentally happens to be 1946) and hypothetically assume that we do not know who Philip Larkin is, can the poem still be read in the same way. I presume not. The poem then disintegrates into a medley of disjunct non-human words which makes signification and unity impossible. But it is this disintegration of signification that holds within it the key to our integration with reading poetry. We now begin to see sensible 'percepts', dislocated though, emerge and create what Gilles Deleuze calls 'Affect'.

Returning to the subject of 'affects' I might safely posit that this poem does create an affect of claustrophobic ennui, and frees the same from the subject of representation. It thus enables us to experience ennui in the abstract, or in its singularity and this is effected through the syntax of the poem, which uses standard language in such a way that seems to halt, stutter and pause before signification can take shape.

Larkin's poetry therefore, probably projects a site traversed by experience which in their differences, 'intensities' and 'singularities' are in the process of 'Becoming'. 'The Whitsun Weddings', a poem from the anthology of the same title and written in 1958 commences with recording multiple and disparate perceptions centered on a train journey. The focus of the poem lies in the vanity of its search for coherence and unity not only among the landscapes of post-war England, but among the lives of those who dwell there. However no unity is achieved as all illusory projections of coherence is subsumed under the never ending flux of experience. The journey coming to a close does not bridge the gap between the perceiver and the perceived; rather it situates them both within the immanent plane of experience, in the process of 'Becoming':

. . . We slowed again,
 And as the tightened brakes took hold, there
 swelled
 A sense of falling, like an arrow-shower
 Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain.
 (Larkin 116)

It is very difficult to paraphrase these lines possibly because the perceptions here are either unrecognized or barely recognized. This is a language which merely gestures a culminating 'effect' in '...arrow-shower/ sent out of sight somewhere becoming rain' that does not appear to be related to any discernable cause which makes us perceive that a singularity is perhaps at work here. What furthermore astounds us is the revelatory power of language and it is this taking up of ordinary language by something which both Deleuze and Derrida calls 'Force', which makes it the language of revelation.

CONCLUSION

Finally, though I have in a miniscule form employed the Deleuzian concept of 'Becoming' with its inherent anti-foundational metaphysics as a possible tool, the intent was to present an alternative approach as a viable praxis of reading. I am certainly aware that poetry like philosophy is not a sedentary trade and W. B. Yeats constantly reminds me that when he says, "It seems that I must bid the muse go pack/ Choose Plato and Plotinus for a friend" (Yeats 106). But does that entail we shall be mistaken in situating Larkin's poetry between the intersection of literature and philosophy. This paper does not intend to create a hierarchy in reading practices, supplanting erstwhile existing modes of enquiry with the present one. For let us not fool ourselves into assuming that at the termination of this intellectual exercise, when the shared living life unobtrusively creeps back to us, we shall not be bound by the imperatives of functionality to succumb to its call.

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