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THE EXISTENTIALIST ASPECTS OF PHILIP LARKIN'S POETRY

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Philip Larkin presents in his poetry incidents, moods and moments of everyday life and reveals the hopes, fears and disappointments of the contemporary English man in the suburbs. The ordinariness of subject matter and the traditional verse form in Larkin’s poetry often leave the reader believing that his poems are very simple and easy to read. To some extent, this impression is true since most of his poems are short lyrics dealing with familiar experiences and his diction concrete and exact, free from the complicated allusions (frequently found in modernist poetry) to classic and mythological works. In most cases, however, Larkin’s poems are deceptively simple, for, like an iceberg, Larkin’s poems tend to hide their profound ideas under the surface. Beneath the ordinariness of the subject matter, one may find that Larkin is examining the various modes of existence of contemporary man and developing a philosophy of life. I find that the philosophy of life the poet examines and develops is that of existentialism. In the following pages I intend to explore the existentialist aspects of Larkin’s poetry.

As a poet Larkin followed a consistent guiding principle for his literary creativity. Though few in number and small in range, Larkin’s comments on his purpose of writing poetry and his conception of the nature of poetry shed much light on his guiding principle. In a brief statement of his views on poetry, Larkin said in 1955:

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.1

Even though Larkin claimed that he had dashed off the statement “as raw material” for D. J. Enright to use in his introduction to the book Poets of the 1950s (RW 79), the poet’s view on poetry in his later life seems to have changed little from what was there in the statement. In his interview with the Observer in 1979, Larkin stated that as a poet, “you want it [your poem] to be seen and read, you’re trying to preserve something. Not for yourself, but for the people who haven’t seen it or heard it or experienced it” (RW 52). The only change we may detect here is that Larkin now seems to center more on other people as his audience. His sense of responsibility “for the people who haven’t seen
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it or heard it or experienced” the “something” seems to have heightened over the quarter of a century. Such a change is also reflected in his poems. In his first collection of poems *The North Ship*, the poet seems to be struggling sensitively to express some private and solitary experiences; the poems appear to have no specific audience and the poet seems more interested in himself and the particular incident, mood or moment of his life. In other words, he was trying to preserve the experience “for its own sake.” Larkin’s later volumes, however, have a much wider range of subject matter and greater technical accomplishments. More often than before Larkin blends his personal experiences with the larger social context. With care, sensitivity, and thoroughness in his observation of life, he is much more in touch with the concrete reality. His poems seem to address more to an audience rather than just himself, and the experience depicted in a poem appears no longer just “for its own sake.” A mature poet, Larkin has a new ability to convince and to move the audience with his poetic substance and particular insights. The reader no longer sees the brooding persona and the general remarks as in *The North Ship*, but is frequently presented with concrete images that convey some general truth of life. Let’s take “Ambulances” in *The Whitsun Weddings* for an example. The incident described in the poem is the sight of an ambulance taking away an injured person, presumably a construction worker, from a street side, which is an ordinary scene on the “loud noons of cities” (WW 33). This is a commonplace experience for children, women and men in the urbanizing suburbs. What the poet sets out to preserve, however, is not the incident itself but the sudden realization of some truth of life. For the children and women here, the experience could mean a change of their views on life as they suddenly

... sense the solving emptiness
That lies just under all we do,
And for a second get it whole,
So permanent and blank and true. (WW 33)

So when they sigh “poor soul,” the people on the scene in fact “whisper at their own distress” (WW 33). By recording through his imagination the sense of emptiness underlying life, which the children and women perceive, the poet has preserved the “something” “for the people who haven’t seen it or heard it or experienced it.” As a poet, Larkin has preserved in his poetry many such experiences as emptiness, disappointment, boredom, fear, and death. Interestingly enough, what he
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takes upon himself to do is exactly what the existentialists want to do. As Ernst Breisach points out:

The existentialists have been demanding that the full immediacy of such experiences as anxiety, risk, boredom, despair, death and nothingness be preserved. Only then can they provide the jolt necessary to project man out of his unauthentic existence.4

As we know many of Larkin’s poems are meant to give their readers an abrupt, unexpected shock that would enlighten them on the human condition in the modern world. So the correlation between Larkin’s principle of artistic creativity and what the existentialists want to achieve through literature seems to be more than just coincidental.

Larkin’s guiding principle of poetic creation bears another affinity to existentialist philosophy. In his elaboration of the pleasure principle in poetry, Larkin commented: “Poetry is emotional in nature and theatrical in operation, a skilled recreation of emotion in other people” (RW 80). With this conception of the nature of poetry, Larkin in many of his poems deals with the emotional life of man, that is, the changing feelings, moods, or affects that appear in the human mind. In “Nothing to Be Said” (WW 11), for example, he suggests that saying “Life is slow dying” and “Hours giving evidence/Or birth, advance/On death equally” to some people would provoke such intense emotions that it would leave “Nothing to be said.” But he also notes that some people are not as sensitive as others and that saying the above to them “Means nothing.” Most of Larkin’s personae, however, are sensitive and emotional people, whose feelings of joy, regret, frustration, anguish, disappointment, loneliness and hopelessness may be touched right off by a photo album, old song books, a radio program, a visit to an old place, a building, or simply drinking alone by a fireplace. Such colloquial expressions as “Stuff your pension!” (“Toads,” LD 32) and “Sod all” (“Send No Money,” WW 43) may well indicate the emotional intensity in the mind of the persona. Larkin preserves the moments of intense feelings so that he may recreate in other people the same emotion which would bring about the awareness of a certain aspect of life. By emphasizing the emotional nature of poetry and dealing extensively with the emotional life of man, Larkin again stands on the ground of existentialist philosophy. For, as John Macquarrie observes, “one of the most brilliant and lasting contributions of existentialist philosophy is to be found in its treatment of...the emotional life of man”.5 As a poet Larkin understands very well the existentialist’s claim
that it is through the emotional experiences "that we are involved in our world and can learn some things about it that are inaccessible to a merely objective beholding" (Macquarrie, pp. 17-18).

With what may be called an existentialist guiding principle of artistic creation, Larkin produced a poetry that treats many of the recurrent themes in existentialist literature. According to Macquarrie, "such topics as finitude, guilt, alienation, despair, death" are recurring existentialist themes (p. 17). To the existentialists, human existence in the world is a matter of contingency. Man's life is a finitude ending in death. During his life man constantly experiences such feelings as anguish, care, alienation, fear, frustration, and despair. If we examine Larkin's poems carefully, we may be astounded to find how many of the above themes are treated in them. First, many of these poems highlight contingency and finitude of human existence. Larkin seems to view our existence as a contingency: man comes into the world for no apparent reason or by mere accident and is doomed in his transient existence. Such ideas may be found in "This be the Verse."6 The poem has three quatrains. In the first, the poet depicts how men are "fucked up" by their parents for no particular reason. The line "They may not mean to, but they do" strongly suggests the contingent nature of man's existence. Two important details must be noted to understand the full significance of the poem. One is that the poet describes no specific individual but a general human being, "you," whose parents are referred simply as "they." Such a choice of general pronouns may tell us that the poet is concerned with the common nature of human existence rather than that of one individual. The other significant detail is the genealogical line of three generations, which may indicate the poet's view that man's contingency is perennial. With the two crucial details in mind, we may better understand the concluding stanza:

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 youself.   (HW 30)

Clearly the poet is commenting on the common condition of human life. In his view man's existence is a "misery" that grows by chances ("like a coastal shelf"). But how can man "get out" of the misery? The poet seems to suggest that we need to make a deliberate choice not to fall into the common misery of man. Since I discuss below this idea of making a deliberate choice, we will now leave it to look at the title of the poem. The imperative mood and the choice of a definite article in
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the title “This Be the Verse” indicate the poet’s confident or even arrogant tone. It appears as if he were making the final statement of human condition in the world and everybody must accept his point of view and take his advice. Larkin’s view of man’s contingent existence matches well with that of the existentialist philosophers. The passage below defines the existentialist concept of contingency:

Contingency includes what Heidegger calls the awareness of “being-thrown-into-this-world.” Man finds himself here in the world although no one has asked him whether he wanted to be here or not. Around him is a puzzling, often terrifying world. Similarly life ends with an event beyond man’s control, death. (Breisach, p. 193)

Apparently, man’s finitude is an important part of his contingent nature. Just as he has no control over his birth, man faces his end in death throughout his temporal existence in the world. A sentitive man, Larkin knows this circumstance well and deals with the theme of death in many of his poems. Since poems on death can be found in all of Larkin’s four volumes of poetry, I will only discuss the few which I think are the most typical of Larkin. In “Next, Please,” Larkin points out that “Always too eager for future, we/Pick up bad habits of expectancy,” hoping something wonderful will eventually approach us. But “we are wrong,” he says; such hopes are only illusions. There is only one certainty in man’s life—that of death! The death image of the black-sailed ship in the last stanza of the poem symbolizes for Larkin the finitude of man:

Only one ship is seeking us, a black-
Sailed unfamiliar, towing at her back
A huge and birdless silence. In her wake
No waters breed or break. (LD 20)

In Larkin’s view of human condition in the world, death is not only sure, but it is present everywhere and at any moment. This idea of “Life is slow dying” is best expressed in his poem “Nothing to Be Said.” We have already discussed the poem earlier. What I would like to add is that the poet’s deliberately general reference to “nations” and “hours” makes what is described in the poem a universal and perennial phenomenon. Confronted with the certainty of death, man’s efforts to save himself prove to be futile. In “The Building” (HW 24-26), the poet describes a modern hospital as a symbol of man’s efforts to save himself with the help of medical science and technology. Larkin understands well that
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man has always tried to save himself. Previously man has relied much on the church for salvation. After the church is gone, which is suggested in "Church Going" (LD 28), man in the secular age has come to the modern hospital for salvation—in fact the religious images such as "confess," "congregation," "cathedrals" are clearly meant to suggest the resemblances in function between the hospital and the church:

Humans, caught
On ground curiously neutral, homes and names
Suddenly in abeyance; some are young,
Some old, but most at that vague age that claims
The end of choice, the last of hope; and all
Here to confess that something has gone wrong. (HW 24)

But the hope for salvation in humans is only illusive. These people in the hospital as well as all other people in the world can by no means escape the seeking of the death-ship mentioned earlier. As Larkin regretfully says, man’s end is “beyond the stretch/Of any hand from here [the hospital]” and the hope to be saved is an “unreal, a touching dream” (HW 25). Even though they come to the hospital for salvation, the patients, as well as the strong and healthy, “All know they are going to die” (HW 25). After all, human existence is an “error of a serious sort” (HW 24).

In addition to such themes as contingency and finitude of human existence, Larkin also deals with such themes as anguish, fear, alienation, disappointment, frustration, and despair, which are characteristically existentialist. These themes recur in Larkin’s four volumes. Early in his poetic career he recognized the “patient hopelessness,” “the silences of death,” “each dull day and each despairing act” that man has to face (“XX,” NS 33). In Larkin’s poetic world, man often confronts nothingness; a feeling of achimg void haunts him from time to time. To Larkin’s typical persona, “Nothing, like something, happens anywhere” (“I Remember, I Remember,” LD 39). Reflecting on the mundane life, he can not shake off “the dread/That how we live measures our own nature” (“Mr. Bleany,” WW 10); even “the deep blue air” beyond “the sun-comprehending glass” of high windows shows only “Nothing and is nowhere, and is endless” (“High Windows,” HW 17). The Larkinesque persona is acutely aware that

Life is first boredom, then fear.
Whether or not we use it, it goes,
And leaves what something hidden from us chose,
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And age, and then the only end of age.
(“Dockery and Son,” WW 38)

With such a world outlook, Larkin’s persona feels anguish and fear over
the cold reality of human condition and often finds that he is isolated
and lonely. He is “the less deceived,” seeing through everything. Even
love seems evasive in nature and unfulfilling in practice. Friendship is
overgrown by grass and becomes sour (“No Road,” LD 26), and lovers
become strangers in bed, wondering why

At this unique distance from isolation

It becomes still more difficult to find
Words at once true and kind,
Or not untrue and not unkind.  (“Talking in Bed,” WW 29)

Desiring to understand man’s dilemma in a world void of meaning,
Larkin’s persona spends his youth trying to learn “the way things go”
but only ends in frustration to find truth to be as illusory as “the trite
untransferrable truss-advertisement” (“Send No Money,” WW 43). The
feelings of the Larkinesque persona are natural experiences of modern
man. According to the existentialist philosophers, “Anxiety results
whenever nothingness through contingency has been understood by man
in its immediate importance for each person.” Larkin’s persona
experiences anxiety because he has understood the nothingness beneath
human existence and wants to become himself through his existential
quest rather than conform to the external world. He understands that
man is always “alone in those matters which count most” and that “no
other man and no human institution can lift the responsibility and
decision from his shoulders” even when “a man’s life is at stake;” in
other words he is experiencing the “existential despair” (Breisach, p.
196).

As an existential being, Larkin’s persona also knows well man’s
relationship with time. As he says it himself, “Time is the echo of an
axe/Within a wood” is the first thing he has understood (“xxvi,” NS
39). Commenting on time in Larkin’s poetry, Peter R. King makes
the following remarks:

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 of time. Time strips us of illusions and is the bearer
of realities which we would prefer to avoid.8
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Indeed, it is "the white hours" of June that remind the Larkin-esque persona of the frailty and brevity of human life ("Cut Grass," HW 41) and that make him obsessed with the idea of aging and death. To him, time is the mirror against which man sees himself and the world. In the fading summer afternoons, the persona notices the young mothers' "beauty has thickened./Something is pushing them/ To the side of their own lives" ("Afternoons," WW 44). Confronted with the end of life, "the old fools" are baffled and kept quiet by "the echo of an axe" within them ("The Old Fools," HW 19). Yet the typical Larkin speaker does not surrender to time; he tries to figure out what time means to him, seeking truth "under the fobbed/Impendent belly of Time" ("Send No Money," WW 43). Most important, however, Larkin's persona, like the existential hero, understands that past, present and future are intrinsically related to each other. In "Triple Time" (LD 35), the poet-speaker expresses succinctly how what constitutes the present also makes up the future of the past and the past of the future. By viewing time in such a triple perspective, he transcends the soured instants of the present and forms a meaningful relationship with time in its continuous passage. What Macquarrie says in the following passage about man's special relationship with time seems to be the exact description of the Larkin-esque persona's relationship with time:

...in the case of the existent past and future are intrinsically related to the present. We never catch the existent in a knife-edge present, so to speak. By memory the existent has brought his past with him into the present; and by anticipation and imagination he has already laid hold on his future and projects himself into it. (p. 200)

What we have traced so far are some of the existentialist themes in Larkin's poetry. The poet's observations and analyses of human condition in a world void of meaning are illuminating, but they may also give the reader an impression that he is pessimistic. This impression, however, is not true. Just as "Existentialism is not necessarily a pessimistic philosophy", Larkin's poetry does not profess pessimism either. Like the existentialist the poet has simply been "realistic in acknowledging the disorder of human existence." More significantly, Larkin, like the adherents of existentialism, does not stop at his realistic picture of the contemporary man and his world. As Macquarrie points out, "Existentialism in most of its forms is not just a cold analysis of the human condition but itself a passionate quest for authentic existence" (pp. 202, 205). The greatest value of
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existentialism, I personally feel, is in its “passionate quest for authentic existence.” It is this quest, the desire of being, that helps the existent to create meaning in his life and face the contingent and void world around him with courage and determination. A great poet of the contemporary world, Larkin fully understood this active aspect of existentialism and presented his persona in his “passionate quest” in at least three very significant ways.

First, the Larkinesque persona seeks the true knowledge of the human condition and the real nature of the world around him. In many of his poems, Larkin’s persona describes the various modes of human existence in the world. Although he occasionally reveals how ritualistic practice and social conventions can make man’s life meaningful—as in “To the sea,” “Vers de Société,” “ Show Saturday” (HW), and “The Whitsun Weddings” (WW)—the Larkinesque persona in most cases would depict the mundane existence of human beings. It is to such scenes as the card-players in a stormy night, the lonely guest in the deserted hotel on Friday night, and the opportunist speaker hurrying off to sell his stale ideas that Larkin’s persona devotes most of his time. He does this, of course, for an important reason, that is, to make people aware of such inauthentic existence and help them to be “less deceived” about the reality. In “Essential Beauty,” for example, the persona urges us to stare beyond the “sharply-pictured groves/Of how life should be” and see “the boy puking his heart out in the Gents,” the aging pensioner and the dying smokers (WW 42). In fact the contrast between the artificial, illusory world of romantic notions and the mundane world of reality is one of the major themes in Larkin’s poetry. The desire to know the truth of human condition in the real world clearly indicates the Larkinesque persona’s attempt to capture a hard and honest look at the inauthenticity of human existence.

Second, Larkin’s persona pursues his quest for authentic existence by acting responsibly with deliberate choice. In many poems the poet-speaker chooses to live a particular mode of life and to find in it his own meaning of existence. In “Reasons for Attendance,” for instance, the speaker chooses to “stay outside” instead of joining the dancers in the lighted glass room because he finds satisfaction and happiness in pursuing his “individual bell” (LD 18). If the speaker at the end of the poem is still not quite sure of the value of his pursuit, he later turns out much more affirmative of such deliberate choices. In “Toads Revisited,” for example, the persona has a clear sense of accomplishment in long-time friendship with toad—a symbol figure for work—as he says:
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What else can I answer,

When the lights come on at four
At the end of another year?
Give me your arm, old toad;
Help me down Cemetery Road. (WW 19)

If deliberately chosen, even life in isolation can be authentic. The light-house keeper in Section II of “Livings” certainly find his solitary life satisfying and meaningful as he sits at the table “guarded by brilliance,” enjoying the meal, “the divining cards” and watching “Lit-shelved liners/Grope like mad worlds westward” (HW 15). The speakers in the above mentioned poems are satisfied because they are able to choose freely what they want to do. As Sartre says, “freedom is nothing other than a choice which creates for itself its own possibilities” and “the desire of being is always realized as the desire of a mode of being.”9 The Larkinesque persona acts freely and responsibly not only for himself but also for others (as in the light-house keeper’s case). Thus he lives an authentic life. To Larkin’s persona, the greatest tragedy of human existence seems to be the loss of the power to choose deliberately. In “The Old Fools” and “The Building,” he suggests that the loss of power to choose is one of the basic signs for the loss of life. As Andrew Motion rightly points out, in Larkin’s poems

The power to choose is repeatedly highlighted as the most fulfilling of all human capabilities. As his poems explore the gulf between deception and clear-sightedness, illusion and reality, solitude and sociability, they constantly discuss the need to decide on one or other of them: that is, not simply to notice the difference but to make an active choice about which to adapt.10

So in his treatment of his persona’s quest for an authentic living, Larkin has worked on such major themes of existentialism as “freedom, decision, and responsibility” with the full understanding that “It is through free and responsible decisions that man becomes authentically himself” (Macquarrie, p. 16).

Third, Larkin’s persona constantly explores the process of aging and the end of life, death. He seems to understand well the existentialist views that “death is the great symbol of human finitude” and that it is “natural to fear death or to be anxious in the face of death” (Macquarrie, p. 198). Larkin’s attitude toward death can be best seen in his poem
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"Aubade," published in the Times Literary Supplement on 23 December 1977. Here is the opening stanza:

    I work all day, and get half drunk at night.  
    Waking at four to soundless dark, I stare.  
    In time the curtain-edges will grow light.  
    Till then I see what's really always there:  
    Unresting death, a whole day nearer now,  
    Making all thought impossible but how  
    And where and when I shall myself die.  
    Arid interrogation: yet the dread  
    Of dying, and being dead  
    Flashes afresh to hold and horrify.

The persona apparently is an aging man who still works every day and has a habit of waking at four every morning. While waiting for the dawn to break, the persona here contemplates death, which is getting nearer with every passing day and brings him dread and horror. In the second stanza the speaker finds himself anticipating "the sure extinction." "Nothing more terrible, nothing more true" than death, but this is how he honestly accepts it:

    Not in remorse
    —The good not done, the love not given, time
    Torn off unused—not wretched because
    An only life can take so long to climb
    Clear of its wrong beginnings, and may never;
    But at the total emptiness for ever.

Thus he describes in the next stanza the dread of death as "a special way of being afraid/No trick dispels." In the face of death's certainty, religion in the past or rational thinking in the modern world of science can by no means drive away the furnace-fear. Even "courage is no good," for "Being brave/Lets no one off the grave." So the speaker finally comes to his philosophical conclusion: "Death is no different whined at than withstood." As the dawn finally breaks, the persona is ready to start his work for another day and to withstand the slowly-approaching certainty of death. Such an attitude toward death is clearly existentialist. For Heidegger claims, "death, honestly accepted and anticipated can become an integrating factor in an authentic existence" (Macquarrie, p. 198).

As shown above, Larkin's persona is quite successful in his "passionate quest" for authentic existence. By keeping a clear-sightedness in viewing man's existence in the real world, by choosing deliberately
and acting responsibly and by accepting and anticipating death with honesty, he creates meaning in his own life in spite of the ultimate futility of the creation and achieves authenticity of existence. This is probably the most significant aspect of existentialism in Larkin’s poetry, indicating Larkin’s recognition of human potentials as well as his admission of human limitations. It is also in this feature that we may see Larkin’s central concern with human “survival in a world without value, a world with all coherence gone.” As Lavine rightly points out, Larkin’s “strength as a poet has been his ability to confront this world and describe it without lament.”

Having traced the several existentialist aspects of Larkin’s poetry, I conclude that Larkin’s affinity with existentialist philosophy is more than just resemblance. In her introduction to contemporary English poetry, Ellen F. Shields speaks thus of Larkin: “[He] captures in his poetry the spirit of postwar England, the spirit of an age of diminished expectations.”

The spirit Larkin captures, I find, is that of a desire to know man’s condition in a war-shattered world and to find a new meaning of life to make up for the lost values of the past. To accomplish his noble but difficult task, Larkin turns, at least in some aspects, to the philosophy of existentialism which was fast spreading in the intellectual world right after the Second World War. A graduate student at Oxford and later a librarian at the University of Hull, Larkin certainly had the advantage of acquainting himself with the most significant philosophy of the time. Although Larkin in his published works made no reference to his acquaintance or view of existentialism, the internal evidence in his poetry points to his remarkable understanding of the essential themes of existentialism and their implications in human life. I believe that an understanding of the philosophical elements in his poetry will enable us to look beyond the technical brilliance and resonant beauty as well as the ordinariness of subject matter and to grasp in his poetry the most profound and even disturbing ideas about human life in the contemporary world.

NOTES

1 Philip Larkin, Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces 1955-1982 (New York, 1984), p. 79. Further references in my text to this collection will be abbreviated parenthetically as RW. I am grateful for assistance from Dr. Michael P. Dean, University of Mississippi, in my preparation of this study.

2 The North Ship was first published in 1945. References will be based on the paperback edition published in London by
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Faber and Faber in 1973 and will be abbreviated parenthetically as NS.

3Larkin, The Whitsun Weddings (London, 1971). Further references will be abbreviated parenthetically as WW.


6Larkin, High Windows (New York, 1974), p. 30. Further references will be abbreviated parenthetically as HW.

7Larkin, The Less Deceived (London, 1955), p. 20. Further references will be abbreviated parenthetically as LD.


10Andrew Motion, Philip Larkin (London, 1982), p. 70.
