

Chapter Two

The Question of Self in Larkin's Poetry

In a non-fictional prose piece compiled by Anthony Thwaite in 2001 under the title "Further Requirements" Larkin had claimed that "novels are about other people and poetry is about yourself" (FR 24). A statement apparently as innocuous as that made presumably either to sound aphoristic or else to pander to the herd mentality of ordinary readers pertaining to literary genres, should ordinarily have merited little attention. For neither are all novels about other people (Joyce, Woolf and Lawrence being predominant examples), nor is poetry merely about the self (Auden and Spender summarily proving that). The comment however assumes significance within the ironic context of an interpretative obsession which has afflicted Larkin's poetry for too long a time- an obsession with his self.

To assume Larkin's naiveté with relation to his craft would tantamount to being oblivious of the flip flops and double entendres he frequently indulged in while talking about them. One is instantaneously reminded of his celebrated quips: denying any knowledge of foreign poetry and claiming to have nothing to do with Modernism. This in spite of the fact, that John Osborne in his monograph, *Larkin- Ideology and Critical Violence* has amply unveiled his more than usual knowledge of both the aforesaid phenomenon.

There is no denying the fact that the self is a dominant and pervasive presence in the poetry of Philip Larkin. Poetry for him was a way of preserving experience: "It seems as if you have seen this sight, felt this feeling, had this vision and have got to find a combination of words that will preserve it by setting it off in other people" (R.W 58). In a book entitled *Philip Larkin*, forming part of a series called "Writers And Their Work" Laurence Lerner has pointed out how "Larkin

disliked the view that poems are born from other poems, insisting that they must come from ‘personal non-literary experience’”(44). It is in this prioritization of the “personal”- locating the source of a poem in the poet’s own experience- that Lerner discerns a “strikingly Romantic statement” and also goes on to equate the same with Larkin’s hostility to T.S.Eliot and Dylan Thomas: the first being the “most celebrated modern defender of Tradition” while the second, a poet whose poems were “resonant with hints of myth” (44). The question is whether this can constitute a sufficient ground for Larkin scholarship to evaluate his poetry from the vantage point of autobiography.

However, if interpretation of poetry predominantly hinges on the autobiographical on account of the poet’s own admission why cannot the obverse become a viable basis of evaluation as well. In response to the question: “why do you write and for whom?” posed by the interviewer of *Paris Review* Larkin had said: “... the duty is to the original experience. It doesn’t feel like self expression, though it may look like it. As for whom you write for, well, you write for everybody. Or anybody who will listen” (Larkin “The Art of”). It therefore becomes obvious that the personality cult quotient of Lerner stands quite definitely on insecure grounds.

Further Requirements (2001), Anthony Thwaite’s collection of previously unpublished non-fiction prose of Larkin contain comments which furthermore appear to subsume the biographical claim. Speaking in connection to his poem “An Arundel Tomb”, Larkin in an interview observed: “I was delighted when a friend asked me if I knew a poem ending ‘what will survive of us is love’. It suggests the poem was making its way in the world without me. I like them to do that” (FR 58). This detachment of the poet from his poetry, of the artificer from his artifact, speaks volumes of the approach that Larkin fostered for his poetry. However if this doesn’t suffice, here is Philip Larkin opening a reading session of “The Explosion” on a BBC Radio

Three programme with the following words : “What I should like to do is to write different kinds of poems that might be by different people. Someone once said that the great thing is not to be different from other people but to be different from yourself. That’s why I have chosen to read now a poem that isn’t especially like me, or like what I fancy I’m supposed to be like” (FR 92).

Notwithstanding all these, the fact remains that the major bulk of Larkin scholarship post the poet’s death has traversed a hermeneutic trajectory wherein the self of the poet and the self of poetry have been crassly equated. Detractors like Germaine Greer, Bryan Appleyard, Tom Paulin, Lisa Jardine and the like latched upon the secondary evidences provided by Anthony Thwaite’s *The Selected Letters* of Philip Larkin , and Andrew Motion’s biography *Philip Larkin: A Writer’s Life* with a cannibalistic abandonment. The duality existing between life and art was dumbly repressed in predilection for a mode of scholarship that verged only on the autobiographical. However, to assume that this penchant for biography as an interpretative tool is predominantly conditional would be naïve and erroneous. This is because reading poetry through the limited and abstracted prism of the poet’s life had traditionally been the most sought-after methodology even among Larkin admirers – a facet exquisitely elaborated by John Osborne. Surveying the phenomena Osborne points out how David Timms in a 1973 monograph, *Philip Larkin* had already set in place “many of the exegetical vices that would be used much less responsibly by Larkin’s detractors” (17). “Larkin”, according to Timms, “writes his poetry not from a preconceived set of principles but as a direct and personal response to particular experiences” (qtd.in Osborne 17).

Larkin: Ideology and Critical Violence is a path breaking work in the sense that it unleashes a concerted reaction against the most dominant mode of critical engagement that had plagued Larkin’s poetry. Acknowledging Timms’ work as both ‘diligent’ and ‘perceptive’, Osborne none

the less goes on to catalogue how Timms rolled all the narrators of Larkin's poetry into one and conflated the same with the author. I quote him at some length:

The analysis of poem 'xx' begins: 'Out walking in winter, Larkin sees a young girl'. A little later we are told, 'The poet in poem 'xxxii' has spent the night with a girl and he stands looking out of the hotel window while she brushes her hair'. Moving on to *The Less Deceived*, Timms describes 'Dockery and Son' as 'the reminiscence of the poet on his journey home, having visited his old college'; while the plot of 'Church Going' is summarized as follows: 'Out for a bicycle ride, the poet stops at a church and goes in to look around'. Not only are the differences between the various protagonists minimized on the assumption that they are all Larkin but, conversely, and yet more damagingly, these narrators are repeatedly referred to as 'the poet' when in not a single case is it vouchsafed that they pursue that singular vocation....Worse follows. Of 'Reference Back', Timms says, 'the speaker is a man in his thirties visiting his parents' home. Mother and son have little in common.... (17-18)

It would have been absolutely logical for a contemporary researcher to forgo Timms' interpretative lacunae and analytical complacency on grounds of puerility, had not Osborne pointed out the recurrence of the same critical mode in recent scholarship on Larkin as well. Regarding the interpretation of "Reference Back", he says:

Since Timms this has become the *don née* for all interpretations of this poem: approximately twenty years later, Professor Trevor Tolley asserts that 'In "Reference Back" ...Larkin recalls an attempt by his mother to reach out to him

emotionally in the “time at home” that she “looked so much forward to”; a further six years on, Warren Hope’s *Student Guide to Philip Larkin* unequivocally asserts that ‘ “Love Songs in Age” and “Reference Back” deal with Larkin’s loyal but strained relationship with his mother’. (18)

Fortunately though, the identity of the poetic self is seldom structured through biography. With major poets, it is a presence which almost always remains elusive, somewhat beyond grasp. To read biography into poetry is to confine the joy of its openness within a closed system of certainties and certitudes- something that 20th century critical theory had vociferously reacted against. Eliot brought about a clear- cut dissociation between the self of the poet and that of poetry, when alluding to the “significant emotion” he held that it “has its life in the poem and not in the history of the poet” (53). “Poetry” for him “is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality but an escape from personality” (52-53). Wimsatt and Beardsley deplored the reductivity underlying the biographical approach when in *The Intentional Fallacy* (1946) they held that “the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art”(Lodge 334). However, it was Roland Barthes who in “The Death of the Author” came out with the most categorical denunciation of biographical criticism, when he rightly observed:

The image of literature to be found in ordinary culture is tyrannically centered on the author, his person, his life, his passions, while criticism still consists for the most part in saying that Baudelaire’s work is the failure of Baudelaire the man, Van Gogh’s his madness, Tchaikovsky’s his vice. The explanation of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the

end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the author confiding in us. (143)

Furthermore it appears that there had been an unintended complicity on the part of Larkin, in generating a notion of the kind of poetry he was writing and the interpretative modality that they presupposed. Poetic creation according to him commences with an “emotional concept” which compels the poet “to do something about it”. The poem for Larkin is a product of his “second stage”, “a verbal device” intended to reproduce the emotional concept in anyone who reads it, “anywhere, at any time”. This is followed by the “third stage” that becomes a “recurrent situation” of people “setting off the device” and thereby recreating for themselves “in different times and places” what the poet felt when he wrote it (RW 83). This apparent congruity projected by Larkin as existing between the self of the poet and that of his poetry, has tempted critics not only to conflate the two, but in certain cases to identify the process with the romantic theory of poetry. However, we understand that an insistence on ‘emotion’ alone cannot be regarded as the hermeneutic touchstone to align the poetry of Philip Larkin with those of Romantic proper. A poetic architectonic almost similar to that of Larkin is what T.S.Eliot too pleads for, when in “Hamlet and His Problems”, he explicates the way by which emotion in art is expressed. Eliot writes: The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an ‘objective correlative’; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked (92). Unprejudiced reading will show that the Larkinesque ‘verbal device’ is a linguistic equivalent to the Eliotic ‘objective correlative’. The very fact that a poem for Larkin is a ‘device’ is proof of its fictionality. Consequently therefore, the “emotional concept” that he intends to recreate with

such device would always be a transmuted one—something in which the self of the poet happily resigns its part in predilection of the self of poetry.

The biographical approach as a means to unravel the poetic self of Larkin is further undermined if only scholarship cares to remind itself that even within the Romantic tradition the stated theoretical position has always been one of transcendence. The Wordsworthian poetic theory undoubtedly talks of ‘emotion recollected in tranquillity’ (251) but also reminds us that in poetic creation it is not the original emotion of the poet that finds expression; rather one that is “similar to that which was before the subject of contemplation” (252), which finds utterance. There is thus a distinction of kind between the two emotions analogous to the two selves. And if that is not enough, here is John Keats categorically stating the distinction:

A poet is the most unpoetical of anything in existence; because he has no identity- he is continually in for- and filling some other body- The Sun, the Moon, the sea and Men and Women who are creatures of impulse are poetical and have about them an unchangeable attribute- the poet has none; no identity- he is certainly the most unpoetical of all God’s creatures....When I am in a room with people if I ever am free from speculating on creatures of my own brain, then not myself goes home to myself, but the identity of everyone in the room begins to press upon me that, I am in a very little time annihilated—not only among Men; it would be the same in a nursery of children.... (Keats, “Selected Letters” 195)

Osborne’s reading of the majority of criticism on Larkin’s poetry tempts him to situate them within the context of Bowdlerism. Extending the purview of deletions to encompass not merely the textual but the interpretative as well, Osborne unleashes a scathing attack on the phenomenon

of biographical criticism which afflicted Larkin's poetry in the second half of the twentieth century. In stark opposition to Dr. Bowdler who in expurgating the indecent and blasphemous passages believed that he was "conferring a benefit not only on the reader but on Shakespeare as well", the "late millennial Bowdler" as Osborne dubs them operated to "diminish rather than enhance the reputation of the chosen author". The pervasiveness of such critical endeavor may be gauged from the fact that "of the twenty to thirty critical books and sixty or so worthwhile essays on Larkin, well over ninety percent employ the biographical approach" (24-25). No wonder therefore that in the dissemination of such hegemonic methodology, Osborne rightly discerns the operation of a dominant ideological pattern.

In contemporary times the self as a philosophical construct is enmeshed within a field of discursivity. Michael Kuhler and Nadja Jelinek in an edited book *Autonomy and the Self* forming part of the philosophical studies series (vol :118) enumerates three distinct approaches for explaining the nature of the self. In the first place there is the 'subjectivist account' prioritizing "subjective or individual traits of the person in question". Secondly we have what is called the 'social-relational account' "pointing to a person's social involvement and social interdependencies"; while the 'narrative account' highlights "a constructivist approach by way of viewing the self as nothing other than what is created anew each time a story is told about who a person is".

Evolving from the seminal works of the American social behaviorist George Herbert Mead, the social- relational accounts of the self "emphasizes the dependence of the self's genesis and continued existence upon social and cultural context". For Charles Taylor who presupposes certain psychological states like desires, motivation, feelings, inclinations as 'a-priori', the self is always a product of 'articulation'. These vague and inchoate attitudes and states await

interpretation (articulation) and since interpretation necessitates language, the role of culture specific society assumes paramount importance. Thus crops up the significance of socially conveyed concepts in way of definition of the self. Proponents of the Narrative Accounts of the self on the other hand, subvert the claim that it is possible to have direct access to the self, be they subjective or social-relational. They construe the self as a linguistic construction formulated in the form of narratives. Paul Ricoeur for example holds that it is the identity of the narrated story which forms the very basis of a person's self. Kuhler and Jelinek therefore rightly observe: "The crucial point is that single aspects of a story gain their meaning only in relation to each other and to the story as a whole. Hence in order to make sense of individual aspects in one's life, we need to tell a story, in which these aspects are put in some form of meaningful order, i.e., in which different aspects are construed as relevant for one another and for the story as a whole" (x-xvii).

The problem with these approaches is that some sort of a self as an already existing phenomenon is regarded as *apriori*, even at the outset of any discourse on the same. While most social-relational accounts presuppose certain psychological states as innate and therefore constitutive of the essence of the self; the Narrativist accounts too, tacitly presuppose the presence of a rudimentary self, which at best is susceptible to mutation but nevertheless existent.

This hypothetical assumption of 'presence' becomes a major hindrance for any meaningful engagement with the self of poetry. For unlike the self of the poet which may be regarded as a monolith (in the nominal sense), the self of poetry is always provisional in essence. Consequently the much talked of poetic persona is not something that the poet assumes at the outset of poetic creation but rather a resultant of poetic experience. Had the assumption of a self been *apriori* to poetic experience, poetry would at best be a posturing- a masquerade that the poet

staged in order to befool his audience. In saying that he intended “to write different kinds of poems that may be by different people”, Larkin probably missed out on a very important point. He couldn’t possibly have written poetry that might have been by different people. But his poetry undoubtedly could proffer different people to whom the poetic experience inhaled.

Unfortunately the provisionality of the poetic self I alluded to earlier is something that is bound to be subverted by a dominant proponent of the subjectivist theory of the self. The theory in question which Kuhler and Jelinek terms the Essential Nature account “claims that the essential nature of a person is not chosen by the person herself but given”. Harry J. Frankfurt the most prominent advocate of the essential nature account floated the concepts of ‘caring’ and ‘volitional necessities’ wherein the former term is defined “as an essentially volitional attitude which can, but does not have to be accompanied by feelings, emotions and value judgments”. The Essential Nature account therefore as Kuhler and Jelinek maintain “claims that a person is confronted with the fact that she cannot help but care about certain things, which means that she can merely discover her already given essential nature- but cannot alter it at will” (xiv).

Explicating the nature of the poetic self, way back in 1818, John Keats in a personal letter addressed to Richard Woodhouse said: “... As to the poetical character itself- it has no self- it is everything and nothing- it has no character- it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated- It has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen. What shocks the virtuous philosopher delights the chameleon poet” (194-195). If this description of the poetic self is anything valid, the only subjective account that can do justice to Larkin’s poetry is the existential account or to be more precise the existential account as was enunciated by Jean Paul Sartre.

Western philosophy from Plato onwards had projected a self that with its coherence and unity can sift through the amorphous chaos of experience and arrive at a structured notion of itself and the world which it inhabits. With Descartes this self got congealed into a nomenclature, an institution, the 'Cogito'- I think therefore I am- which was disseminated through subsequent philosophical phases. The British empiricists structured reality differently but the essentiality of the structuring self remained unchallenged. The same can be said of Hegelian idealism and Kantian metaphysics. Intent upon converting metaphysics into a scientific discipline, Kant systematized it but did not move away from the concept of the self as a structuring unity. Kant regarded the phenomenal world as the only object of cognition, but it was primarily due to the 'analytic unity of apperception' and the 'synthetic unity of apperception' that (according to Kant) cognition was made possible.

From the view of life as pure essence, the focus shifts to existence for the first time and in a concerted manner in the Phenomenological philosophy of Edmund Husserl. Husserl defined phenomenology as the science of the essence of consciousness (Ideas 1) and in a way prioritized the first person point of view of consciousness, by making it an intentional act always directed towards an object. However Husserl made a categorical distinction between the object of an experience and its content. For Husserl the content which he preferred to call 'Noema' was aligned to the generation of a concept or percept which was eternal and could exist irrespective of the object. However the question still remained: who appropriated the concept? And it is here that Husserl provides an answer which by no means is different from any other Idealist philosophers. The self is once again proffered but in a new garb, a new nomenclature- 'The Transcendental Ego'.

With Martin Heidegger's anti-foundational philosophy, totalitarian and essential narratives received a tremendous jolt. In his theory, the notion of the self even if not displaced is at least placed on infirm ground. 'Dasein' as conceived by Heidegger being inherently temporal, it becomes difficult to define the 'who' of 'Dasein' in terms of a self. The implication is that the self for Heidegger is neither a subject nor a substance, but something which is open to transformation. A significant advancement no doubt, but does that in any way imply that the self is dead?

This essential, debilitated 'self' however dies paving way for a contingency that is perennially in a state of flux and change, realizable but never fully realized; and it is Jean Paul Sartre whose philosophy puts the final nail in the coffin. While Descartes discovered his primary truth through the experience of the 'cogito', Sartre probes vertically into the depths of subjectivity, thereby uncovering a multilayered consciousness. In his essay *The Transcendence of the Ego* Sartre enumerates the three stages to one's self-discovery: 1. Consciousness (as consciousness of something); 2. The non-conscious (the world, that consciousness is conscious of, corresponding to the en-soi); 3. The self (corresponding to the pour-soi and that which is not the world).

The topology of consciousness that Sartre devised speaks of three levels of consciousness: the pre-reflective which is merely consciousness of something; the reflective; and the self-reflective where consciousness becomes its own object. The distinction among these three levels has been deftly brought about by Sartre himself through an analogy of the act of reading. Christine Daigle summarizes it as follows:

When you are engaged in the act of reading, you are also conscious of the room you are in, the temperature of the room, the chair on which you sit, etc, all on a

pre-reflective level. But you are also actively engaged in the reading, which is a reflective activity that requires the second level of consciousness. As a reflective consciousness, you are using reflection to be conscious of something in a different way...at the same time you can also think of yourself as reading, i.e. actively thinking about your reading, you are conscious of yourself as a reading- self. (22)

Of course it needs to be understood that though Sartre presents the levels of consciousness in a sequence, ultimately they are contemporaneous moments of consciousness.

Apparently Sartre's philosophy moves by means of a revision of the Cartesian 'ego' and Husserl's 'intentionality', but the resolution he achieves is of a radical kind. Whereas both Descartes and Husserl posit the 'ego' as the unifier of conscious experiences, for Sartre this role resides typically with consciousness. The ego for him is a reflective by-product of conscious activity. Sartre writes:

The world has not created the 'me' the 'me' has not created the world. These are two objects for absolute impersonal consciousness, and it is by virtue of this consciousness that they are connected. This absolute consciousness, when it is purified of the 'I' no longer has anything of the subject. It is quite simply a first condition and an absolute source of existence. (Sartre, "Transcendence" 105-6)

As has been already mentioned, the phenomenological approach that Sartre employs has been adapted from Husserl and in keeping with the latter, Sartre too believes in the intentional structure of the consciousness. However where he primarily differs is in the way Husserl distorts the reflective nature of consciousness by making it reflexive (turning back) and in the way generates a subject in the form of a transcendental ego. Sartre on the other hand argues as Robert

Denoon Cumming explicates: “When I become self conscious, I am reflecting upon my pre-reflective consciousness of something else, and the self (the ego) of which I become conscious is not the subject performing this act of reflection, but its intentional object, which has emerged in retrospect from the pre-reflective consciousness I am reflecting upon” (12). Self consciousness therefore in the philosophy of Sartre cannot secure for the self that privileged role of transcending experience as it does in Descartes and Husserl. The result is that the self has finally become a transitory object, delusive and mutable and thereby ceased to be the anchor of experience that it had been since the inception of philosophy.

An engagement with the poetry of Philip Larkin from the perspective outlined above can open up new avenues of interpretation and effectively counter interpretative stereotypes, which his detractors have chosen to, embellish him with. One of his early poems ‘Two Guitar Pieces’ composed in 1946 and included in the anthology *In the Grip of Light* may be a case in point. The poem opens with a cluster of photographic images as in a montage with obvious associations of a post-war landscape, just subtle enough to touch upon the impending vacuity of the scene:

The tin-roofed shack by the railroad
 Casts a shadow. Wheat straws in the white dust
 And a wagon standing. Stretched out into the sun
 A dozen legs are idle in dungarees... (CP 8)

What is obvious is that the consciousness of the speaker is in the Sartrean pre-reflective mode, whereby the world, manifesting itself through beings of discrete kind is simply registered as

exists. The experience as it gathers up and presents itself before consciousness is predominantly eidetic whereby the speaker merely catalogues whatsoever it is that surrounds him:

One frowns above a guitar: the notes, random
 From tuning, wander into the heat
 Like a new insect chirping in the scrub,
 Untired at noon. A chord gathers up and spills,
 And a southern voice tails out around one note
 Contentedly discontent. (8)

The mode of consciousness however changes from the pre-reflective to the reflective in the penultimate and ultimate lines of the first stanza whereby the 'southern voice' is perceived by the speaker as 'contentedly discontent'. The oxymoron is not intended to be decorative but rather connotative of acceptance of 'discontent' of the inmates of a no-where, no-when provincial town, of which the 'southern voice' is an emblematic representative.

The reflective mode of the speaker already alluded to persists in the second stanza as well when he despairingly informs: "Though the tracks/ Burn to steel cities, they are taking/ No one from these parts." A telling comment no doubt, on the imbalance of economic opportunities existing between provincial towns and cities, but what are we to make of the self of the speaker? It is a specific poetic experience that proffers the semblance of a self, and though not nominally projected, it is a self that is anguished and 'discontent', one that has contentedly embraced the stasis that the material conditions of life had thrust it into.

It would be interesting to note that “Two Guitar Pieces” is comprised of two sections written with a gap of three days between 15th and 18th September 1946. However it may be construed that they were not intended to be separate poems, since a thread of thematic unity in the form of the ‘guitar’ binds the two parts. Neither has the landscape changed nor the mood and once again at the outset of the second section, the speaker is back to the pre-reflective mode: “I roll a cigarette, and light/ A spill at the stove. With a lungful of smoke/ I join you at the window that has no curtain”... (8). Experience is randomly catalogued as the existent brushes shoulder with all other existents surrounding him:

A man is walking along

A path between the wreckage. And we stare at the dusk,

Sharing the cigarette.

Behind us, our friend

Yawns, and collects the cards. The pack is short,

And dealing from now till morning would not bring

The highest hands. Besides, it’s too dark to see.

So he kicks the stove, and lifts the guitar to his lap,

Strikes this note, that note. (8-9)

That the modes of consciousness are contemporaneous and not sequential, is attested by the fact that the speaker, while unreflectively registers the presence of his yawning friend collecting the cards also becomes reflectively apprehensive of whether countless deals would bring unto him 'the highest hands'. Again a self proffers but on this occasion it is not the erstwhile self submerged in anguish but a self that is apprehensive of the prospects of life and chooses to remain resigned.

For the first time in the poem, the third stanza of the second section, confronts a diligent reader with a consciousness that is self-reflective. In other words, a consciousness that is conscious of a previous experience inhering to it surfaces, creating in its wake an ego-the 'I'- which is not merely nominal but real, in the limited sense, that it can now structure the very experience which had constituted it. Interestingly however, the stimulus to that end had been of a kinesthetic sort- 'I am trembling'- and is significantly experienced as 'sudden'. The impersonal notes of the guitar project a self only when the nominal persona of the poem becomes kinesthetically aware of it as a human construct-'language'- and reflexively turns back upon experience:

I am trembling:

I am suddenly charged with their language, these six strings,

Suddenly made to see they can declare

Nothing but harmony, and may not move

Without a happy stirring of the air

That builds within this room a second room;

And the accustomed harnessing of grief

Tightens... (9)

What follows is a brief interjection of a self, vainly striving to organize and structure experience only to dissipate itself into nothingness:

And so I watch the square,

Empty again like hunger after a meal.

You offer the cigarette and I say, keep it,

Liking to see the glimmer come and go

Upon your face. What poor hands we hold,

When we face each other honestly! And now the guitar again,

Spreading me over the evening like a cloud,

Drifting, darkening: unable to bring rain. (9)

Holding ‘poor hands’ while facing ‘each other honestly’ is a relational perception dependent upon self-reflective consciousness. But does the consciousness abide? The concluding image of the guitar spreading the speaker ‘over the evening like a cloud’ is so numinous and abstract, that any such possibility is summarily precluded.

In 1938, Jean Paul Sartre citing a description of the death of the American Joe in a French café from the novel *U.S.A* went on to claim that “Dos Passos is the greatest novelist of our time”: “Joe laid out a couple of frogs and was backing off towards the door, when he saw in the mirror

that a big guy in a blouse was bringing down a bottle on his head held with both hands. He tried to swing around but he didn't have time. The bottle crashed his skull and he was out". (qtd. in Cumming 3)

The passage held special importance for Sartre in the light of the fact that it operated as an exquisite analogy, enacting as it were in fictional form the workings of consciousness and the consequent evolution of the self. The analogy as Robert Denoon Cumming rightly pointed out in his introduction to *The Philosophy of Jean Paul Sartre* "appeals to him (Sartre) because a mirror is a surface. It lacks depth" (7). What Dos Passos' description reveals are successions of random images, and that is also precisely how human consciousness behaves. Furthermore, Sartre's intention is not to abjure reflection as an explanation of human action in the traditional sense of the term. What he simply asserts regarding reflection may be adequately summarized in the language of Cumming. I quote him at some length:

... that the self or character of which we then become conscious, is an outcome of this process of reflection; it is not an antecedent structure which, when disclosed by reflection, will provide a causal explanation of why I am doing what I am doing. He is further asserting that to the extent that I construe as an explanatory principle the self or character of which I become conscious through reflection, my self-consciousness is self- deception. (8)

An exquisite poetic equivalent of the thesis that the self is an object of reflection and not an antecedent structure finds expression in a poem entitled "Best Society" (1951). The speaker in the poem while deploring the abrupt loss of solitude which marked his transition from childhood

to maturity reflects on the comparative merits of socialization as against his self imposed isolation:

Then after twenty, it became

At once more difficult to get.

And more desired- though all the same

More undesirable; for what

You are alone has, to achieve

The rank of fact, to be expressed

In terms of others, or it's just

A compensating make believe. (CP 56)

What is quite obvious is that a reflective consciousness is at work here, directed specifically to a cluster of consciousnesses lived in the past. The semblance of a self is also projected in retrospect, that being appreciative of the sociability of all human virtues cannot decide between the relative claims of self and society and thus stands confounded.

It is with a concatenation of harsh consonantal sounds, 'viciously then I lock my door' that the persona ushers in a temporal shift in the fourth stanza. Reflection on past consciousness gives way to the immediate present where the reigning deity is that of a self-reflective consciousness registering its existence among all other existents:

Viciously, then, I lock my door.

The gas-fire breathes. The wind outside

Ushers in evening rain. Once more

Uncontradicting solitude

Supports me on its giant palm... (56)

However, it is at this juncture that the reader is confronted with a problem of an epistemic kind. What is he to make of the three final lines that conclude the poem: “And like a sea anemone/Or simple snail, there cautiously/Unfolds, emerges, what I am” (57). I would venture to propose that within the context of the poem, the emergence of the ‘I’ cloistered apparently like a ‘sea anemone’ or ‘simple snail’ unfolding itself only in solitude is very close to the Sartrean position that the self is never an antecedent structure but always an object of reflection. Larkin though, is too subtle a poet to be dumbly appropriative. The ‘I’ undoubtedly ‘unfolds’, but does it have an essence? In the absence of anything specific, the ‘what I am’ can turn out to be only a surface- a mirror for example lacking any depth whatsoever.

Larkin is not quite the kind of poet who is naturally pre-disposed to structure poetic experience in essential terms. The two poems hitherto discussed are replications of a consciousness that prefers to lacerate in the flux of existence rather than remain secure within the ambit of conjured essence. “Wedding Wind”, is most likely to be read as the confused expression of a bride who cannot quite come to terms with her altered state and therefore remains apprehensive:

The wind blew all my wedding- day,

And my wedding-night was the night of the high wind;

And a stable door was banging, again and again,

That he must go and shut it, leaving me

Stupid in candlelight, hearing rain,

Seeing my face in the twisted candlestick,

Yet seeing nothing. (CP 11)

Close reading shall possibly reveal that within the space of the poem, it is not the experience of the speaker which assumes significance. Rather it is the wind as an existent, animating through its actions all other discrete existents, including the speaker and her apprehensions that are foregrounded:

All is the wind

Hunting through clouds and forests, thrashing

My apron and the hanging cloths on the line.

Can it be borne, this bodying-forth by wind

Of joy my actions turn on, like a thread

Carrying beads? (11)

Existence here to quote a Sartrean term is in a state of repletion, a nagging sense of surfeit, a feeling that something is too much. Consciousness following upon the heels of consciousness strikes the poetic persona, primarily at a pre-reflective level and in an instinctive manner. There is also a categorical distinction made between the 'being for itself' (Sartre's *pour soi* and the

human persona in this case) and the ‘being in itself’ (Sartre’s *en soi*) manifesting in and through the natural world. The point of contrast resides chiefly in the inherent dichotomy informing the two modes of ‘being’; for while the latter happily reconciles to the mutations of ‘being’, only as existents; the ‘pour soi’ in the embodiment of the speaker fails to come to terms with her limitless freedom and therefore stands confounded. The wind rages through the ‘wedding night’, the ‘stable door’ simply bangs. ‘Hunting through clouds and forests’, it ‘thrashes’ the ‘apron and the hanging cloths on the line’. They presumably dance to its tunes. But what about the human speaker. Is she really happy as she claims? The apparent joy that impelled her thought soon gives way to a feeling of anguish that is the shared lot of the ‘being for itself’, confronted by unlimited freedom. What the ‘pour soi’ aspires for is the uncontradictory solidness of being that informs the ‘en soi’ and realization of the fact that it is unattainable only leads to anxiety. The poetic experience is not unlike what Antoine Roquetin went through in Sartre’s *Nausea*:

I haven’t had any adventures. Things have happened to me, events, incidents, anything you like. But not adventures. It isn’t a matter of words; I am beginning to understand. There is something I longed for more than all the rest without realizing it properly. It wasn’t love, heaven forbid, nor glory, nor wealth. It was ... anyway, I had imagined that at certain moments my life could take on a rare and precious quality. There was no need for extraordinary circumstances: all I asked for was a little order (58).

Likewise in the context of “The Wedding Wind”, though events and incidents happen to the speaker of the poem, they are unable to take on that ‘rare and precious quality’, with the result that order remains elusive.

It is common assumption that a philosophical tradition, soaked in the empiricism of Hobbes, Locke, Barkley and Hume, would have little room for the existential philosophy of Sartre. However literary history confirms that in the post-war period, the impact of Sartre on British literature and culture was too profound to be ignored. In *Literature, Politics and Culture in Post-War Britain* Alan Sinfield writes: “Sartre could not be ignored- because he was the most significant intellectual currently writing; because he wrote from Paris; and because it could not be denied that he had one answer to the persisting anxiety about the status and roles of intellectuals. All the main texts and novels were rapidly translated” (141). This is neither to conjecture nor insinuate the probability of an ideological appropriation of Sartrean ideas by Philip Larkin. Major poetry can hardly be a blind adherence to ideological precepts, but what are we to make of a poem wherein the articulation of experience is strictly in line with the Sartrean notion of subjectivity? A thorough engagement with a poem “Waiting for Breakfast While She Brushed Her Hair” should adequately substantiate the aptness of the question:

Waiting for breakfast while she brushed her hair

I looked down at the empty hotel yard

Once meant for coaches. Cobble stones were wet,

But sent no light back to the loaded sky,

Sunk as it was with mist down to the roofs.

Drain pipes and fire escape climbed up

Past rooms still burning their electric light:

I thought: Featureless morning, featureless night. (CP 20)

Things are catalogued as they appear to the pre-reflective consciousness with their matter of fact existence and if the 'I' intervenes in the last line that is only to assert the drabness of reality.

It is with the first word of the second stanza-'misjudgment'- that the poem changes direction. Judgment and misjudgment alike, pre-suppose the operation of logic and reasoning and the reasoning in this poem is directed towards a specific end. The self in the form of the nominal 'I' had initially surfaced in the last line of the first stanza, though it had remained a somewhat passive reflector of consciousness. However in the second stanza a reflexive (turning back) movement of consciousness sets in, structuring the erstwhile reality into a narrative of human purport:

Misjudgment: for the stones slept, and the mist

Wandered absolvingly past all it touched,

Yet hung like a strayed breath; the lights burnt on,

Pin points of undisturbed excitement... (20)

The use of verbs - 'slept', 'wandered', 'touched', 'hung' and 'strayed'- as human metaphors, point towards an anthropocentrism of the worst kind. Unable to face the disarray and randomness of existents encumbering him, the speaker goes on to accommodate them within the context of a human drama designed to render reality agreeable. Through an operation of the reflective consciousness, the 'wet' cobblestones of the first stanza now sleeps, the banal 'mist' wanders like an absolver, while,

...beyond the glass

The colourless vial of day painlessly spilled

My world back after a year, my lost lost world

Like a cropping deer strayed near my path again... (20)

“Waiting for breakfast while she brushed her hair” is an immensely interesting poem in the sense that it replicates not the contemporaneous but rather the sequential evolution of all three modes of human existence as also the transitoriness of the so called human self. In the third stanza an invocation to poetic inspiration made palpable through the deftly personified ‘tender visiting’ sets the tone and tenor for the self-reflective consciousness to operate and thereby transfix poetic experience within the bounds of causality:

But, tender visiting,

Fallow as a deer or an unforced field,

How would you have me? Towards your grace

My promise meet and lock and race like rivers,

But only when you choose. (20)

The crude disenchanting lacklustre existents of the first stanza perceived through a pre-reflective consciousness undergo a change in the second due to the operation of the reflective. But unlike Sartre’s *Roquentin*, human predicament is such that it is terrified to exist in the abstract and is naturally pre-disposed to view experience within a teleological framework. Thus the persona’s anthropocentric reflections on reality in the second stanza compel him to believe that the experience he traverses through had been designed to get him confronted with his numinous poetic inspiration. Finally though there is an all-pervasive presence of the self in all the three stanzas, what is striking is that they are mutative and very different from one another.

As one approaches the mature Larkin, i.e poems written more or less after 1955, a significant change appears to set in: consciousness becomes considerably less disposed to be its own object. In other words, the operation of the self-reflective consciousness, whereby consciousness reflectively turns back on itself is notably reduced. Consequently therefore, there is less propensity on the part of the poetic persona to structure the randomness of experience into a coherent whole. Existence is predominantly regarded as gratuitous- a given condition, unwarranted and uncalled for, regarding which all that can be said is that 'it is'. This inchoate flux called existence is appreciated for what it is, and unlike the poems already discussed, little effort is made towards any imposition of order. The self is not obliterated; it only gets more subsumed within existence:

Jan Van Hogspeuw staggers at the door
 And pisses at the dark. Outside, the rain
 Courses in cart ruts down the deep mud lane.
 Inside, Dirk Dogstoerd pours himself some more,
 And holds a cinder to his clay with tongs,
 Belching out smoke. (CP 177)

These lines are from a poem called "The Card Players" written in 1970 and published in the anthology *High Windows*. It is a narrative of action with character names that are subtle amalgamation of the beast and the phallus. The narrator in this poem comes around as an objective onlooker pre-reflectively registering a human drama held under the rancor of a calamitous sky:

Dirk deals the cards. Wet century-wide trees

Clash in surrounding starlessness above

This lamplit cave, where Jan turns back and farts,

Gobs at the grate, and hits the queen of hearts. (177)

There is no reflective consciousness at work here, no attempt to structure the experience and correlate it with the speaker. However a rudimentary self is undoubtedly present since from a phenomenological perspective, a minimal form of self awareness is a constant structural feature of conscious experience. It is this sense of a self that exclaims: “Rain, wind and fire! The secret, bestial peace!” (177). Obviously, this is neither a reflective self nor one that is reflexively constituted by a self-reflective consciousness. This is merely a pre-reflective self awareness and not a self in the strictest sense of the term.

Incipient would be a somewhat precise word to designate the form of the self under consideration. An inchoate, intangible, rudimentary presence that casts its aura throughout the poetic experience but typically eludes grasp. “Friday Night in the Royal Station Hotel” for example is a poem wherein a pre-reflective consciousness finds itself confronted by a world of inert beings, thronging the interior of a hotel, when, “...all the salesman have gone back to Leeds,/ Leaving full ashtrays in the conference room” (CP 163). The different coloured ‘empty chairs’, the desolate ‘dining room’ declaring ‘a larger loneliness of knives and glass’, the ‘silence laid like a carpet’, constitute the being-in-itself (en-soi) that though passive, are solid and self-identical in their fullness of being. Herein lies the facticity of the Royal Station Hotel as also the persona in whom the experience inhere.

However the being-for-itself (pour-soi) or the human speaker is caught up in a situation. And since it is in the nature of the for-itself to transcend its facticity, the headed paper which simply should have been an inert being, provides him with a means to do so and he muses eloquently: “The headed paper, made for writing home/ (If home existed) letters of exile: *Now/ Night comes on. Waves fold behind villages*” (163). The entire poetic experience hangs in mid-air, being unstructured by a self, or conversely facilitating no genesis of a self barring the unsubstantial pre-reflective consciousness. Larkin’s superiority as a craftsman not only in this poem but also in the previous one lies in the fact that by abjuring the first person narrator, he considerably rarifies the role of the ‘self’ in poetry and transmutes the same to the level of the generic human being. The ‘headed paper’ does not only invite the incipient narrator of the poem to write the italicized message. It presumably invites the reader or for that matter, anyone.

Even when the ‘I’ appears in poetry as in a 1968 piece titled “Sad Steps”, it is used in the limited and nominal sense, of a being among many other beings that throng the scene. It does not act, does not organize the conundrum of experiences it is circumscribed within, but merely like a passive register responds to external stimuli:

Groping back to bed after a piss

I part thick curtains, and am startled by

The rapid clouds, the moon’s cleanliness.

Four o’ clock: wedge-shadowed gardens lie

Under a cavernous, a wind-picked sky.

There's something laughable about this... (CP 169)

Larkin's foregrounding of sensation rather than thought as a constituent pre-condition for poetry may be evinced from the word 'groping' which occurs in the very first line of the poem. Rather than any concerted thought on the subject, it is an urgency on the part of the speaker to relieve himself that occasions the poem. Instinctively thereafter, the speaker parts 'thick curtains' only to discover existence in its varied forms resplendent in the fullness of being: "High and preposterous and separate-/ Lozenge of love! Medallion of art! / O wolves of memory! Immensements! ..." (169). The moon is 'High', 'preposterous', and 'separate' but more importantly it is solid and self-identical, a being-in-itself, essentially self-contained. This constitutes the facticity of the moon but not necessarily the facticity of the speaker. As a being for-itself he can only aspire for the solidity of the in-itself, but since that is an impossibility the only recourse available is transcendence:

One shivers slightly, looking up there.

The hardness and the brightness and 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. (169)

The 'singleness of that wide stare' facilitates an understanding, but the understanding does not anymore alight upon the nominal pre-reflective consciousness that registered the experience. The 'I' fritters away and analogous to the previous poems, once again the incipient poetic self paves the way for the rarified generic human to take over.

Do we therefore find a regimented sense of self in the poetry of Philip Larkin? The much talked of Larkinesque poetic self as we find it is a no-self, a no-thing, constituted with felicity and perpetually moving towards hedonistic abandonment. The problem with erstwhile scholarship when they chose to dub him as "minor registrar of disappointment" (James wood), "foul mouthed bigot" (Peter Ackroyd), "provincial grotesque" (Bryan Appleyard) and the like stemmed from a misconception that the self of a poet is the aggregate of the contents of his poetic works taken as a whole. However poetry is not a bolus and is far too nuanced a medium for such broad generalizations. Each poem by a particular poet is shaped by a distinct series of consciousness and it is only within the experiential parameters of such consciousness that the self of a poet ought to be discerned. This holds true for every poet and Philip Larkin cannot be a possible exception.