

## Chapter Five

### Re-locating Larkin beyond the Lurking Canon

This dissertation was undertaken with the specific intention to revisit Larkin's poetry from perspectives not hitherto employed as pervasively as it ought to have been. I use the word 'pervasive' consciously, intending to allude to the already observed fact that though thematic existential engagement with Larkin's poetry has preoccupied a handful of critics, it has remained so puerile as to merit little attention. John Osborne, as has been catalogued in the third chapter, did engage literally with a couple of Larkin's poems from the vantage point of Sartrean existential concepts; yet it is only a chapter-length work forming part of a book. In attempting a first-hand existentialist engagement, principally with reference to a selection of Larkin's *Collected Poems*, this dissertation can presumably claim to be radical in its approach.

Engagement with poetry in contemporary times has been reduced to a subculture, instituted predominantly within the confines of the academia or else in certain poetry journals. In the absence of new ideas to enliven poetry through literary criticism, it becomes difficult to conjecture, how long the natural demise of the genre may be thwarted. This is particularly true of the poetry of Philip Larkin. For how else can one justify the fact that even among the scant literary criticism being rolled out today on Larkin, the great majority still situate the poet either within the postwar context or else within the context of his so-called Englishness. This also explains why I consistently failed to find a single critical work that engages with Larkin's poetry from the perspective of the Camusean absurd. Tempting as it may be to employ postmodern theoretical approaches to the reading of poetry, nothing explains the indifference meted out

towards philosophical habitations that were not only contemporaneous but pertinent to the genesis and growth of Larkin's poetry.

The title of this dissertation, 'Larkin Lost, Larkin Found' can therefore claim adequate aptness, with its curious blend of desire and aspiration, despite the fact that desire in this case is negatively construed. It is a desire to lose the man Larkin, with his self-ego bloated by contemporary literary criticism in predilection for the self-effacing poet that Larkin ought to have been. At the same time it is a desire to subsume prevalent critical practices with their penchant for autobiographical modes of engagement, in favour of a mode of criticism that can lend fresh lease of life to the critics' debate about Larkin's poetry. No wonder then that this project aspires to move 'Towards a new poetics of reading'.

However, what exactly is implied by the phrase 'poetics of reading'? Historically, the word poetics first surfaced around 350B.C in Aristotle's work of the same name and has since been seen as an attempt to define the structural and functional principles of works of art, predominantly in the verbal medium. Traditionally though, as Rad Borislavov in an article titled 'poetics' published by The Chicago School of Media Theory holds: "The term poetics has been interpreted as an inquiry into the laws and principles that underlie a verbal work of art and has often carried normative and prescriptive connotations" ("Poetics"). It is in this broader sense that the title of the present project needs to be understood. Reading strategies are like 'prescriptive' working principles that a researcher employs and a logical handling of such principles alone can widen the ontological limits of poetry. Judged from this perspective, one can only hope that the reading strategies employed in this dissertation shall prove to be a viable hermeneutic that is 'productive of meaning' and 'responsive to communication'.

A research work, in order to be a responsible scholarly endeavour, should pave the way for further research. Assuming that the critical orientations employed in this dissertation does evolve as alternative reading paradigms of Larkin's poetry, it is now time to point out a couple of areas, where the existential tool may be profitably implemented. This shall considerably widen the horizon of Larkin scholarship and, as I have repeatedly stressed, redeem the poetry from the clutches of biographical and linear historical criticism. One such area that readily offers itself to engagement is the 'Other', which is not only a domineering presence in Larkin's poetry, but more often than not provides the very ground of poetic tension. Strangely though, it is not the generic 'Other' that has commanded much attention in existing Larkin criticism, but a diluted and gendered form of the 'Other' made palpable in such work as *Philip Larkin: His Life's Work*. Summarizing the contents of that text Regan writes:

Janice Rossen's *Philip Larkin: His Life's Work* provides a good introduction to some of the principal concerns of feminist criticism, concentrating on the different 'kinds' of women and the 'different versions' of femininity that Larkin's poems depict. Rossen shows how women are habitually presented in terms that are either negative and hostile or romanticised and idealistic. She argues that this polarity of viewpoints typifies the dilemma of a generation of men who were educated apart from 'the girls' and who consequently viewed the opposite sex as 'mysterious and inaccessible'. ("New Casebooks" 13)

As a specimen of an alternative reading paradigm, this work definitely has an optimal critical value and Regan is probably justified in endorsing it. However, if we only revisit the much talked of 'women' question and are ready to contest the same, from the perspective of the Sartrean 'Other', a whole new reading pattern might evolve, shedding new light upon Larkin's

poetry. In a chapter titled “Difficulties with Girls”, included in the *New Casebooks* on Larkin, Rossen writes: “The difficulties which Larkin lays bare exist in a complicated tangle of cause and effect; it is difficult to know whom to blame” (136). This is an obvious reference to the much propagated problem with women in Larkin’s poetry and to substantiate her claim Rossen alludes to a letter which Larkin wrote to Sutton from Oxford: “I am of the opinion that I shall never know anything about the woman I marry, really. What do I know of you? Nothing at all. Preserve me from interesting personalities” (136). A claim that an epistolary document, forming part of the poet’s personal reflection at an impressionable age, can constitute the basis for critical observation is rather naive. Furthermore what disquiets a sensitive reader of Rossen’s book is the inference she draws from the letter. According to her, “it typifies the dilemma of his [Larkin] generation of men, who were educated apart from the ‘girls’ who came to seem mysterious and inaccessible. It assumes that women are ‘other’ and distanced”. (136)

To say that this inference is a flawed one on a number of grounds would be an understatement. In the first place, one wonders how a coeducational system can be regarded as the sole repository for disseminating a better understanding between the sexes. What about the role of family and civil society in that regard? Granting too much agency to the education system alone is a little farfetched to say the least. Secondly how does Rossen absolve herself from the countercharge of reinforcing stereotypes when she claims that ‘it typifies the dilemma’ of ‘Larkin’s generation of men?’ Finally if we go by her claim that ‘women are other’, how can Rossen be indifferent to a fundamental question in Larkin’s letter that she herself cites? For Larkin in the letter does not talk of women alone. He posits his problem in a typically gender-neutral context when he asks Sutton, ‘What do I know of you?’ while at the same time confirms

his ignorance: ‘Nothing at all’. One therefore discerns that Larkin’s problem is not only with women but with the generic question about how the ‘Other’ is to be comprehended.

In his book *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre introduces the concept of the ‘Other’ in part 3 under the section “Being-for-others”. In this part of the book, he does not only examine the existence of others but also theorizes on the possible means of engagement with the Other which necessarily leads to conflict. Summing up the Sartrean position regarding the Other, Daigle writes:

It is as an object that I appear to the other; my encounter with the other is that of my body with his. When I meet someone, there is first the physical presence of bodies in a certain spatio-temporal frame. I am a consciousness in my body, and I meet a human body. This human body greets me, or not, looks at me, or not; it is a body inhabited by a consciousness: the consciousness of the Other. Sartre says that there is an unbridgeable distance between the for-itself and the Other: the body is that through which I meet the other, at the same time it is an obstacle as it prevents me from attaining the Other’s consciousness. The relationship between me and the Other is one of exteriority. I am an object for the Other and the Other is an object for me. (73)

Is this not precisely the manner in which the Other in Larkin’s poetry impress themselves upon us? Consider for instance the poem “Deep Analysis” composed as early as 1946. The poem conjures up a desirable woman: ‘Comely at all points’, bewailing her unrequited love in the mode of a monologue:

Through your one youth, whatever you pursued

So singly, that I would be,

Desiring to kiss your arms and your straight side

-Why would you not let me? (CP 4)

It is desire that has propelled the youth in whatever he 'pursued' and desire in itself is not found to be wanting in the woman either. Yet confrontation with the Other only brings forth conflict:

Your body sharpened against me, vigilant,

Watchful, when all I meant

Was to make it bright, that it might stand

Burnished before my tent? (4)

The body, therefore, has evolved as a principal impediment to any meaningful interaction between the lover and the Other, with the result that the gulf between them remains insurmountable:

I could not follow your wishes, but I know

If they assuaged you

It would not be crying in this dark, your sorrow,

It would not be crying so (4)

Larkin's poetry reconciles with the abjectness of the human situation by accepting that the Other cannot be comprehended. It is this realization that informs the primary conflict in such

poems as “Marriages” (CP 63), “Love” (CP 150), “This be the Verse” (CP 180), and probably finds its most explicit utterance in “Counting”:

Thinking in terms of one

Is easily done –

One room, one bed, one chair,

One person there,

Makes perfect sense; one set

Of wishes can be met,

One coffin filled.

But counting up to two

Is harder to do;

For one must be denied

Before it’s tried. (CP 108)

The luxury of love as a saving grace has ordinarily been denied in Larkin’s poetry. On the operational front, his poetry reflects and weighs the possibilities and consequences of human relationship, only to shirk at its prospects. Even when the body as an obstacle towards meaningful engagement is somehow circumvented, due to situational proximity, the otherness of the Other remain intact. “Talking in Bed”, a poem written in 1960 and published in *The Whitsun*

*Weddings* should bear testimony to that: “Talking in bed ought to be easiest / Lying together there goes back so far / An emblem of two people being honest” (CP 129). There can be no doubt that the bed with its pre-defined spatial limits actually proffers a possibility of communication. However the possibility remains inexhausted with the result that “...more and more time passes silently” (129). Indifferent to human concerns, the world outside the room enacts the perpetual drama of existence even as the speaker languishes within the cloister of his self imposed isolation:

Outside the wind’s incomplete unrest

Builds and disperses clouds about the sky,

And dark towns heap up on the horizon.

None of this cares for us. (129)

But why do words elude the speaker? That too within the periphery of a ‘bed’ supposed to conjoin privacy and intimacy. Is it because of the Sartrean ‘look’ that transfixes the Other as an object and is reciprocated likewise? In absence of the possibility of love which alone, according to Sartre, could have either transcended the Other’s freedom or else captured it, that seems to be the only probability:

Nothing shows 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. (129)

We therefore find that the body as an obstacle, complicated by the objectifying look of the 'Other', is the fundamental stumbling block in the way of establishing a meaningful converse in Larkin's poetry. At the same time, we do not find enough reason to agree with Rossen when she says that 'it is difficult to know whom to blame'. The malaise having been identified, it rests upon future scholarship to unravel the cause.

Another area of research which can be a direct corollary of this project is existential psychoanalysis of the poetry of Philip Larkin. Regan's complaint (already alluded to in the introductory chapter of this dissertation) that the poetry of Larkin has remained 'curiously impervious' to newer 'critical methodology' such as psychoanalysis can thereby find adequate redress, though from an altered perspective. I insist upon the word 'altered' in order to signal my departure from the beaten track of Freudian psychoanalysis in predilection for a methodology that would stand out by dint of being non-essential and, therefore, in keeping with my fundamental project.

As a deterministic theory, Freudian psychoanalysis is characterised by a belief in a structured psyche- id, ego and superego- and actually posits the idea of a psycho-biological residue called the 'libido' as an explanation of human motivation. Apart from these, Freud's mechanical-biological explanations, and his belief that nature and nurture explain human behaviour rather than choice, impute to his theory an essence, which was devised in order to secure for psychoanalysis a ground that would ensure its scientific credibility. However, Betty Cannon in

her book *Sartre and Psychoanalysis* has offered a challenge to ‘Freudian determinism and Freudian metatheory’ by taking recourse to existential psychoanalysis. This explains why the book is subtitled: “An Existential Challenge to Clinical Metatheory”. It is her contention that the ontological metatheory of Sartre can better address certain critical contemporary issues in psychoanalysis than the psychobiological metatheory of Freud. Following Sartre, Cannon writes:

... the objective of existential psychoanalysis would be to reveal in all its concrete richness an individual’s original choice of being, which though grounded in the concrete world, is not reducible to it. Such a choice is constantly changing and capable of radical transformation. Hence existential psychoanalysis must maintain a flexibility in interpreting symbols and symptoms not simply between individuals but with a particular individual at different times in therapy (Cannon 20)

This ‘original choice’ (also known as the ‘fundamental project’ in existential psychology) is, according to Cannon, not much unlike the Freudian ‘complex’. And “just as the Freudian psychoanalyst attempts to discover the childhood events which led to the ...complex, so the existential psychoanalyst attempts to discover the ‘original choice of being’, whereby a client has adopted this or that particular worldview”(19) .

In his introduction to *A Writer’s Life*, Andrew Motion observes: “During his adolescence Larkin had decided he was ‘a genius’. At the same time, judging by his secretive but thorough self preservation, he accepted that he would be written about” (xvii-xviii). This affirmation of the ‘original choice’, in possibly the most celebrated biography of the poet, warrants an existential psychoanalysis that can significantly widen the scope of Larkin scholarship. Undoubtedly this presupposes a high degree of dependence on epistolary documents- both sent and received by

Larkin- but in this case the labour of the researcher will be far more meaningfully employed. This is because letters and other correspondences are to be studied as relevant documents, not only in the context of locating the ‘original choice’ of Larkin the man, but also in so far as they foreshadow the ‘original choice’ of Larkin the poet. For there is a profound schism that informs the personality of Larkin: “The soul of shy modesty was also a self-promoter; the man admired for avoiding bright lights was continually tempted to step into them; the ‘Hermit of Hull’ was his readers’ friend winning their trust and warm affection by telling them a good deal about himself” (xix). Thus, there is a possibility that the ‘original choice’ of Larkin the man might either have been abrogated, or else radically transformed in Larkin the poet. It is also possible, that the choice may have been re-instated in a new garb and problematized to such an extent, as to defy recognition. But one thing is certain: in consonance with Sartrean metapsychology, the surface psychic symptoms would manifest themselves through concrete choices and not discovered in the, “instinctual life and the unconscious” (Cannon18) as in Freud. The task of the prospective researcher therefore promises to be a challenging one.

Unlike the empirical sciences, a literary research of this kind may find it difficult to claim to have discovered something new. What it can of course claim is a novelty of approach, by dint of which a supposedly mediocre poetry would time and again, open up new horizons of expectation and fulfillment. Larkin’s poetry certainly, it will be conceded, continues to invite such engagement.