

Chapter One

Introduction: Quest for a New Poetics of Reading

My acquaintance with the poetry of Philip Arthur Larkin (1922-1985) began as a purist reader in a vein somewhat analogous to what Larkin wrote to his publishers Faber & Faber when they allowed the novels of Barbara Pym to go out of print: “I feel it is a great shame if ordinary sane novels about ordinary sane people doing ordinary sane things can’t find a publisher these days” (SL 375). In fact it was a delight in this Larkinesque sanity which attracted me to it in the first place. Little did I realize that the epithets Larkin chose to characterize the work of his liking, actually dogged the critical reception of his own poetic oeuvre to such an extent as to leave little room for posterity to transcend their confines.

Until the last decade of the 20th century Larkin, arguably the most renowned of the so called ‘Movement’ poets, was known in the Anglophone world, chiefly for the wrong reasons. Widely acknowledged as the unofficial Poet Laureate of England, his popularity and credibility as a major poet was severely undermined after the publication of the *Selected Letters* (1992) and an authorized biography *Philip Larkin: A Writer’s Life* (1993) by Andrew Motion. Epistolary evidences were cited to project the man as anti-intellectual, sexist, parochial etc. and the much necessary Eliotic disjunct between the man and the poet needed for objective aesthetic appreciation was comfortably consigned to oblivion. The result was a scholarship of limited insight dominated either by thematic concerns or else an ideologically charged political vituperation. It is only after the publication of *The New Case Book* in 1997 edited by Stephen Regan that serious engagement has begun with his poetry. There is of course no gainsaying that Regan’s introductory survey of the trajectory of Larkin criticism is so succinctly documented

that a brief summary of the same becomes indispensable for any discourse to commence. And any work on Larkin's poetry must take into account Regan's overview.

Critical enquiry into the poetry of Philip Larkin immediately followed the publication of *The Less Deceived* in 1955. As the most popular and widely read poet of the post war era, his poetry was conventionally read in consonance with a national character, and the popularity he enjoyed was interpreted as an outcome of his sentimental Englishness. The now much debated existence of 'The Movement' was taken as a focal point to cushion the poetry of Larkin along with other poets of the 1950s and it was predominantly through the abstracted prism of that paradigmatic exteriority that critical consensus was catered to. In a review of the *New Lines* anthology titled 'The Middlebrow Muse' (1957) Charles Tomlinson vituperatively attacked the second hand responses which characterized the work of the so called 'New Line Poets': "They show a singular want of vital awareness of the continuum outside themselves, of the mystery bodied over against them in the created universe, which they fail to experience with any degree of sharpness or to embody with any in stress or sensual depth ... They seldom for a moment escape beyond the suburban mental ratio which they impose on experience". This mode of engagement congealed itself into a system, when at about the same time Al Alvarez in his introduction of *The New Poetry* anthology berated Larkin for evincing a 'politeness' and 'decency' typically conforming to perceived English virtues. Donald Davie waxed eloquent but it was only to situate Larkin in the line of the "thoroughly English souls" as "a very Hardy-esque poet" who stoically accepted the way things were. It did not quite appear to him that a stoical acceptance of the eventualities of life may as well be a necessary adjunct to something more primeval than the socialization quotient he tried to circumscribe Larkin within.

The 1970s saw the appropriation of another form of reading paradigm onto that of the one already alluded to. Owing largely to the influence of newer critical practices grouped together under the umbrella term ‘literary theory’, the idea of a transcendental element as well as a symbolist one began to be aligned with the poetry of Philip Larkin. J.R. Watson for instance wrote an article “The Other Larkin” in 1976, which discerned “moments of epiphany” and “deeply felt longings, for sacred time and sacred space” in the poetry of Philip Larkin. No wonder this change was conditioned by the changing horizon of expectations among readers of Larkin’s poetry, but the effect it registered was a vicious one. The axis of Larkin’s critical reception seemed to traverse along the familiar spaces of thematic studies.

However, all this changed with the publication of *The Selected Letters* in 1992 and the authorized biography *Philip Larkin: A Writers Life* in 1993. Surprising it is how a poet’s reputation can undergo dramatic changes in just a decade after his death. The same poet, who by common consent was regarded as the greatest after Eliot, became a site evincing the derogation of poetic possibilities, which merited abuse critical scorn or at best indifference. *The Selected Letters* enabled reigning critics to establish a direct correlation between the man and the poet and since the former was regarded as despicable, the latter couldn’t have been an exception. Germaine Greer reviewing the *Collected Poems* in the “Guardian” equated the expression of the poems with the poet’s negativity when she said of Larkin: “His verse is deceptively simple, demotic, and colloquial: the attitudes it expresses are also anti-intellectual, racist, sexist and rotten with class consciousness”. Then followed the clichés that were to dominate so much of Larkin criticism: “sewer under the national monument” (Paulin 1992), “foul-mouthed bigot” (Ackroyd 1993), “dreary laureate of our provincialism” (Appleyard 1993) and the like. The

result was that the limits of discourse thus structured, once again compartmentalized the poetry of Larkin within the ambit of pseudo-ethical pedagogy. (1-7)

How does one carve out a critical space from within a critical canon that has been so prejudiced, watertight and regimented? Conforming to the confines of the already established modes of discourse and at the same time attempting to alter its balance- if ever so slightly- would appear to be the most preferred option. However to arrive at a new poetics of reading, far removed from the beaten track of doctrination alluded to earlier, a critique of the existing canon becomes imperative, to which we now turn in the following section.

II

What appears interesting is that these concatenations of metaphors seem to be strictly in line with the Nietzschean concernment with ‘perspective’ as a means of structuring reality. In order to lend authority to a particular form of thought or rather style of living, Larkin scholarship sought to perspectivize reading in terms that are overtly connotative of the historical materiality of the epoch, structuring the limits of discourse in the first place. Alan Sinfield in his brilliant book *Literature, politics and culture in post-war Britain* has substantially elaborated how Fascism, Capitalism and Welfare-Capitalism were the prime ideological options available to European politics in the 1930’s. Western Europe appropriated a Welfare-Capitalist economic model which strictly followed a Keynesian line of smoothing out the Capitalist cycle of boom and slump. This consensus however broke down in the mid 1970’s “when capitalism went into a slump allowing a return to Pre-Keynesian economic theories and authoritarian social attitudes” (32). Also Stuart Hall et al. in their major work *Policing the Crisis* (1978) have dealt extensively with the dissolution of consent in post-war British society leading to what they term the ‘Exceptional State’. Their work specifically highlights how Britain’s post-war recovery being incomplete, led

to the falsification of the myths of 'affluence' around which organization of consent was primarily facilitated in Britain throughout the '50s and '60s. It was the intervention of the Right wing politician Enoch Powell, who through his 1968 'Rivers of Blood' speech, shifted the debate towards 'Authoritarianism'. The conservative party which subsequently came to power in 1970 adopted authoritarian solutions, thereby legitimizing rule of law as the only means to defend hegemony in conditions of severe crisis. Thus, there evolved a general tendency, to regard all threats to social order as a transgression equivalent to violence.

However this 'New Right' (Barker 235) ideology, popularly termed 'Thatcherism' was countered by what is called 'Urban Leftism' (269) - a defensive ploy against right wing ideologies. Ultimately when Tony Blair in 1995 spoke of 'community' (278) the first post-socialist response to the new right was registered as a political discourse. There was a heightened "desire to discover a foundation for national life in working class or popular culture" and also "a belief that politics should start listening to the mundane desires of common people" (279). The revival of the ideology of community therefore stemmed from the abandonment of fraternity based on class and solidarity based on nationalism.

What bearing does this foray into British politics have in our understanding the trajectory of Larkin criticism? I believe that in view of the pervasiveness of critical unanimity among Larkin scholars, most of whom happened to be academics and intellectual elite, a limited consent could have initially been forged around the discourse of 'authoritarianism' leading subsequently to a general acquiescence of the ideology of 'community'. Viewed from this perspective, the general dismissive stance against Larkin's poetry would undoubtedly proffer the concept of Althusser's 'interpellation' as a factor which probably conditioned the generation of the critical canon. For nowhere is the complicity of the subject in the process of his own domination more pronounced

than in the majority of critical work centered on the reading of Larkin's poetry. The interpellated subject in the form of the reader having been structured and subjected by the aforesaid ideologies I referred to earlier, disseminated or rather replicated the same in writing; creating reading paradigms and stereotypes in the process. The circulation of terms like 'racist', 'sexist', 'suburban', 'parochial', etc within the central canon of Larkin scholarship should substantiate my claim.

In fact the class belonging nature of English culture can seldom be disputed. What the English called 'High Culture' was predominantly the culture of the leisured upper middle class. Even T.S Eliot in *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* upheld the same class-fixation in so far as culture was concerned (Sinfield 95). Philip Larkin, it is true, did not belong to the leisured middle class but Alan Pryce- Jones editor of the *Times literary supplement* found in 1956 that most writers irrespective of their class affiliations were co-opted within leisured middle class value structures (89). The central problem of dealing with the canon of Larkin criticism is that since the publication of *Selected Letters* it appears obsessed with epistolary evidences in way of levelling charges, despite the fact that the poetic oeuvre of Larkin provides little vindication of such claims. This is particularly true of the charge of 'racism'. Critics such as Germaine Greer, Tom Paulin, Peter Ackroyd and Bryan Appleyard, oblivious of their own ideological appropriation sought to stigmatize a poet without granting him similar leverage in return. I however submit that even if this charge is partially tenable it has got to do with the 'New Right' ideology which as John Gray has pointed out "brought into conservative discourse a sectarian spirit that belongs properly not with conservatism, which is skeptical of all ideology but with the rationalist doctrines of the Enlightenment" (qtd. in Barker:243). "Homage To A Government", a

poem by Larkin highly commented upon for championing a cause ironically dubbed as ‘the white man’s burden’, is specifically worthy of note:

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

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

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

Almost the same angst informs the following lines in “Going Going”:

And that will be England gone
 The shadows, the meadows, the lakes,
 The guild halls, the carved choirs

There'll be books, it will linger on

In galleries: but all that remains

For us will be concrete and tyres. (CP 190)

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

To suppose

They share that world, to think their sort is

Matched by something in it, shows

How separate and unearthly love is,

Or women are, or what they do,

Or in our young unreal wishes

Seem to be: synthetic, new,

And nature less in ecstasies. (CP 135)

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

This trajectory of Larkin scholarship, truncated and fractured as it was, merited immediate redress and *The New Case Book* on Philip Larkin edited by Stephen Regan in 1997 sought to do precisely the same. For the first time, after decades of essentialist reading, this book proffered the idea that the poetry of Larkin merited newer modes of critical engagement far beyond the certitudes established by erstwhile critical practices. Starting with the symbolist dimension in Larkin's poetry (Andrew Motion's "Philip Larkin and Symbolism"), this book went on to accommodate not only David Lodge's Structuralist engagement ("Philip Larkin: The Metonymic Muse"), but at the same time anticipated that much talked of post modern openness in approach through Graham Holderness' brilliant article entitled "Reading Deceptions- A Dramatic Conversation". Four critics of different theoretical orientations are made to stage an imaginary debate around Larkin's "Deceptions" to show how "Critical theory can 'open up' Larkin's writing to a variety of illuminating, if not always reconcilable viewpoints"(11). Apart from these, certain other approaches(Feminist, as in Janice Rossen's "Difficulties with Girls" and Historicist, as in Stan Smith's "Margins of Tolerance") had been incorporated probably to foreground the Barthesian 'Readerly' text openness as opposed to the 'Writerly' text paradigm Larkin had long been circumscribed within.

What however appeared to be so novel though, was not an unmixed blessing. The sequence of essays Regan selected was absolutely in keeping with the avowed publication policy of New Casebooks which in its own way sought to rarefy the subject of discourse. In the general editors' preface, John Peck and Martin Coyle of the University of Wales, Cardiff wrote: "Central to the series is a concern with modern critical theory and its effect on current approaches to the study of literature" (X1). Voicing the same sentiment was Stephen Regan, who in the introduction to the

title claimed: “Modern literary theory ought to find much of interest in Larkin’s work, and yet the poems have remained curiously impervious to some of the newer critical methodologies such as feminism, psychoanalysis and deconstruction” (11). The present project however takes issues with such attestations on the ground that it prioritizes certain reading practices even at the cost of abrogating the demands of the text. Had Regan’s project been motivated solely by the demands posited by Larkin’s poetry rather than a somewhat stilted wish to secure for Larkin a pan-theoretical praxis, he would have seen that the poetic oeuvre of Larkin proffered broad overtures which clearly pointed towards a crisis of ‘being’. A dissipated sense of self, overridden by negation and anxiety; a perennial preoccupation with the privation called ‘death’ unassuaged by any flicker of hope, points unequivocally towards a philosophy of existence, thereby necessitating the search for different sets of methodological apparatuses.

Andrew Motion in his introduction to *Philip Larkin: A Writer’s Life* talks of the contradictions in Larkin’s will, which I believe shall go a long way towards connoting the parameters of my argument. In relation to Larkin’s published and unpublished work, he has pointed out how in three different clauses of the same will Larkin had “entrusted his trustees, the power to publish his unpublished work; instructed them to destroy it; and told them to discuss the matter with the literary executors” (xvi). Is this only the caprice of an author intent upon posthumous fame, or should it be construed as the ontological anxiety of a man in the face of irreconcilable choices – choices which he had not been able to come to terms with, even in his ‘Writer’s Life’. Again Richard Bradford in his biography of the poet, *First Boredom, Then Fear: The Life of Philip Larkin* has called attention to how Larkin’s self marginalization was effected not only at the cost of the world, but at its own peril. Larkin’s inability not just to act but even to conceive acting is exemplified by Bradford through allusion to a lecture incident where Larkin

urinated in his clothes, because he couldn't summon the will to go to the restroom and relieve himself (66). The question is: shall we see in this incident, the contours of a fundamental pattern of existence, or should the same be consigned to the domain of behavioral psychology? The decision I am tempted to infer would be a matter of perspective.

Parallel to such external evidences, here is the existential Philip Larkin in a 1949 poem called "Sinking like Sediment through the Day":

Huge awareness, elbowing vacancy,
 Empty inside and out, replaces day,
 (Like a fuse an impulse busily disintegrates
 Right back to its root.)

Out of the afternoon leans the indescribable woman:

'Embrace me, and I shall be beautiful'-
 'Be beautiful and I will embrace you'-

We argue for hours. (CP 27)

Twenty five years later the same sense of vacuity, the same problem of choice giving way to anxiety can be seen to inform his poetry, and I allude to the first stanza of a poem entitled "The Life With a Hole in it" to substantiate my point:

Life is an immobile, locked
 Three-handed struggle between
 Your wants, the world's for you, and (worse)
 The unbeatable slow machine
 That brings what you'll get. Blocked,

They strain round a hollow stasis

Of havings-to, fear, faces.

Days sift down it constantly. Years. (CP 202)

Existential concerns therefore do not merely colour Larkin's poetry. It might seem that he had been an existentialist throughout.

On the face of such compelling evidences, one would have expected Larkin scholarship to pick up the existential axis as a tool for further engagement, but here too contemporary criticism seems predominantly obsessed with thematic studies. Prominent issues such as loneliness, death, old age, conflict between desire and reality and the illusory nature of choice do find a place in article length work and sometimes monograph as well. However such thematic concerns have seldom been dealt with from the vantage point of an existential crisis besetting the poet in his historical and contextual totality. In fact the problem of choice and a pervasive sense of emptiness did find a place in Larkin criticism from the early '70s, whether that be in Calvin Bedient's 1974 monograph entitled *Eight Contemporary Poets; Philip Larkin : Writers and their Work* by Alan Brownjohn (1975) or John Wain's journal article "The Poetry of Philip Larkin" published in *The Malahat Review* (1976). This is also particularly true of such later journal articles as Martin Stannard's "The Men Running up to Bowl: Aspect of Stasis in the work of Larkin and Amis" (1989) and "The Theme of Death in the poetry of Philip Larkin and Charles Tomlinson" (1991) by Eckhard Auberleben which looks at images of entrapment stasis, hesitation and enforced silence in the writings of Philip Larkin and Kingsley Amis. It is these aspects that have been merely touched upon by a handful of critics but never dealt with extensively which shall form the crux of this enquiry.

In a monograph entitled *Double Lyric: Divisiveness and Communal Creativity in Recent English Poetry* (1980), Merle Brown contends that recent British poetry is neither marked by the presence of a distinctive world view nor an existential stance but rather a hesitancy to adopt one. Philip Larkin's poetry is seen to occupy a special place, by adopting a habitually dismissive attitude. The present project however intends to contest this gross generalization because the so called 'habitual' is not as pervasive a presence as it is made out to be. On the other hand the poetic oeuvre of Larkin will show beyond doubt that the existential stance is probably a habitual stance with Larkin undercut only at times by a posture of dismissiveness which, as Richard Palmer had convincingly argued in his book *Such Deliberate Disguises: The art of Philip Larkin*, was only a mask.

Eulogizing Larkin's poetic aspirations, James Booth in a recent biography of the poet published in 2014 and titled *Philip Larkin- Life, Art and Love* observes: "At the age of thirty in 1953 Larkin set out his aim in a tone of jokey presumptuousness: 'I should like to write about 75-100 new poems, all rather better than anything I've ever done before, and dealing with such subjects as Life, Death, Time, Love and scenery in such a manner as would render further attention to them by other poets superfluous'" (10). What for Booth is simply a matter of 'tone' and that too of 'jokey presumptuousness' merits critical engagement not only because the majority of Larkin's chosen subjects are dominant existential themes but also because the phrase "further attention to them by other poets superfluous", construed from an altered perspective, hinges on the word 'manner'. It is the manner which according to Larkin "would render further attention [...] superfluous". The question however is whether the word manner be understood in terms of stylistic ingenuity of composition, or whether it pre-supposes and insinuates an approach (presumably philosophical) which Larkin intended to appropriate in order to fulfill his

cherished aim. Again, by way of accounting for Larkin's deep seated anguish of failure, Booth in the penultimate paragraph of his introduction asserts: "From the beginning he [Larkin] was horrified that our precious existence, here, now, must inevitably falter and be extinguished in death. Larkin's biological clock ticked more loudly than those of other people. Unalloyed happiness was, he felt, unattainable, if only 'because you know that you are going to die'" (18). Undoubtedly Booth talks of 'existence', but then he comfortably situates it within the confines of romantic 'reflection'. It does not occur to him that the sense of failure which haunted Larkin could be inextricably bound to a crisis of an existential sort and consequently turn out to be complex and personal than he thinks it to be.

Anglo- American literary criticism therefore appears to be somewhat reticent in even acknowledging the feasibility of an existential engagement with Larkin's poetry. By and large there is a hush-hush silence around the word existential, which in turn calls for some degree of socio-political deliberations. The cold-war ideology which developed from 1947 onwards saw Britain collaborating in the US ideology of the defense of freedom of those which it felt were subjugated. This Truman ideology appropriated from Monroe posited communism as the primary antagonist and a perception evolved that communist gains in whatever part of the world was threatening to British interests. Again since this much propagated freedom was conceived in opposition to communism, the defense of 'high culture' became identified with anti-Stalinism. Antipathy for communism inevitably led to an antipathy towards its practitioners, with the result that a deliberate attempt was made by the Western Alliance to consign the foremost existentialist of the time, Jean Paul Sartre and his brand of existentialism to the dustbins of history. (Sinfield 148, 159). Nevertheless history testifies to the fact that through into the '60s, Sartre with his principles of commitment was a dominant intellectual influence in British culture. Though

Sinfield discerns the impact of Sartre in a very limited area- in so far as the latter's ideas about commitment was used to constitute the 'other' (141), it would be my endeavour to trace the discursive relationship that the poetry of Larkin transacts with certain primary existential constructs as enunciated by Jean-Paul Sartre.

Furthermore, using Sartre alone as a scaffold to engage with the existential concerns in Larkin's poetry would prove inappropriate precisely because in the 1960s the choice of the British intellectual which predominantly wavered between Sartre and Camus got congealed with the latter. In opposition to Sartre's idea of artistic freedom through an insistence on commitment, British intellectuals clung to the belief that it was possible to preserve 'freedom' by avoiding political attachment (Sinfield 143-145). In *Myth of Sisyphus* (1942, Trans 1955) Camus had expounded absurd freedom: "There is no future, henceforth this is the reason for my inner freedom" (57). The move, it ought to be admitted, was a quietist one. Nevertheless it enabled British writers to position themselves as the comfortable other in relation to those discredited French bourgeoisie who were being coaxed by Sartre to venture into the domain of committed literature. Camus the high priest of British culture, prescribed: "When all is collapse and nothingness, one can accept such a universe and draw from it his strength, his refusal to hope, and the unyielding evidence of a life without consolation" (58-59). It would therefore be obvious to discern in this overarching quietist mood the germ, not only of 'Movement poetry' in general but a major part of the poetry of Philip Larkin as well:

Hours giving evidence
 Or birth, advance
 On death equally slowly.
 And saying so to some

Means nothing; others it leaves

Nothing to be said. (CP 138)

Quietist freedom however can be slavish and may as well be identified with the freedom of the condemned if it is not aligned with rebellion. And it is here that I fall back on Hartley's description of the 'Movement' being 'dissenting'. What exactly then is the nature of Larkin's revolt or dissent? The nature of rebellion in Sartre as the British intellectuals read it was predominantly material. With Camus however dissent was interpreted to be metaphysical. Introducing *The Rebel* (Trans1933) Herbert Read asserted: "The nature of revolt has changed in our times. It is no longer the revolt of the poor against the rich. Camus displays our metaphysical revolt, the revolt of man against the conditions of life, against creation itself" (qtd. in Sinfield: 146). Is this not the vein in which the major part of Larkin's poetry impress themselves upon the reader? And if it is so, would it be unfounded to trace the exact nature of dissent in Larkin's poetry- to try and understand the various sociopolitical nuances which might have led to such appropriation.

It will be seen that I have been consistently pleading the case of existentialism as an epistemic tool to engage with the poetry of Philip Larkin. A couple of pertinent questions therefore crop up: what exactly is existentialism and why do I proffer it as a viable orientation for this project. To answer the first it ought to be pointed out that there is a certain amount of elusiveness about this term, and also that there are as many types of existentialism as there are existentialists. In the absence of a common body of doctrine to which all existentialists subscribe, John Macquarrie describes existentialism "not as a philosophy but rather as a style of philosophizing" (14). In a brilliantly lucid book entitled *Existentialism* he strives to demarcate the basic characteristics of

this style of philosophizing. I quote him at some length since the spirit of that exposition will constitute the crux of this project:

It is a philosophy of the subject rather than of the object. But one might say that idealism too took its starting point in the subject. Thus one must further qualify the existentialist position by saying that for the existentialist the subject is the existent in the whole range of his existing. He is not only a thinking subject but an initiator of action and a centre of feeling. It is this whole spectrum of existence, known directly and concretely in the very act of existing, that existentialism tries to express. (14-15)

In answer to the second question raised, I maintain that the choice of existentialism as a theoretical framework is dictated by the fact that it is typically suited to unravel the emotional life of man caught in crisis. This, as the survey of relevant literature had already shown is something that Larkin scholarship has summarily ignored. In its search for objective knowledge, western philosophy has for a long time been dominated by a restricted form of rationalism, whereby changing feelings and moods of the human mind have been considered irrelevant to philosophy's task and at times even a hindrance. However as Macquarrie states, "It is precisely through these that we are involved in our world and can learn some things about it that are inaccessible to a merely objective beholding. From Kierkegaard to Heidegger and Sartre, the existentialists have provided brilliant analyses of such feeling states as anxiety, boredom, nausea, and have sought to show that these are not without their significance for philosophy" (17-18). Existentialism therefore doesn't merely concern itself with the man but man in relation to his world. It is this historical contextuality, this situatedness in time that one feels can open up Larkin's poetry to a host of untraversed nuances.

It will be further remembered that I had sought to locate the operational domain of existentialism within the emotional life of man caught in crisis. A relevant question once again stares us at the face: How does this crisis manifest itself? In this context, it ought to be understood that though 'Existentialism' as a philosophical orientation is a recent phenomenon, existential thought is as old as human civilization itself. Karl Jaspers' conception of the 'axial age' corroborates this fact by locating it at a point in time, around 500 BC, when "there took place an extraordinary and worldwide stirring of the human spirit" (Macquarrie 38). The phenomenon was pan-cultural, commencing with the Hebrew prophets (Amos, Hosea, Isaiah), running through the pre-Socratic Greek philosophers (Thales, Heraclitus, Parmenides), and encompassing the likes of Confucius, and Lao-Tse in China, Zarathustra in Iran, and Buddha in India (38). Summarizing the central characteristics of the period Jaspers writes: "What is new about this age...is that man becomes conscious of being as a whole, of himself and his limitations....By consciously recognizing his limits, he sets himself the highest goals. He experiences absoluteness in the depths of selfhood and in the lucidity of transcendence" (qtd. in Macquarrie 39). Acknowledging that the 'axial age' was prompted by a crisis, Macquarrie traces the origin of the same in the preponderance of what he calls the 'mythical mentality' in so far as "this was a timeless mentality in which the sequence of events repeats itself in a never ending series of cycles". Consequently the turning envisaged was not merely a turning away but a turning which would make man "face the radically temporal and historical character of human existence" (40).

The advent of Christianity with its insistence on 'end-time' as a time of decision continued the aforesaid existential search and "although Jesus talked of rewards and punishments, he saw the chief motive for obedience in the desire to gain one's authentic being" (44). However, as

Christianity moved into the middle ages, it tended to become “rationalistic, propositional and metaphysical” (48). This crisis was further aggravated by recurrent plagues, wars, political and ecclesiastical ferments, which subsumed rational thoughts as being able to tie things up in too neat a package. Confronted with this crisis a new form of mysticism evolved in the personage of Meister Eckhart whose influence on German philosophy can be traced even in Heidegger. It was Eckhart who claimed that “It is God’s nature to be without a nature”. By analogy therefore, “man being made in the divine image affords a clue to the mystery of God” (49).

In fifteenth century Europe Renaissance science and the Reformation once again generated crises within the emotional life of man, though obviously from diverse vantage points. First there was a diminution of human status whereby he was displaced from the centre of the cosmos to the circumference due to the subversion of a geo-centric universe in favour of a helio-centric one. Secondly, a crisis also took place in the religious order of things whereby it was perceived that religion had become too much of a matter of giving assent to dogmas. It was here that an existentialist understanding of life came as a refuge to man, organizing and giving direction to the manifold ambivalences he was circumscribed within. In this regard, Macquarrie astutely reminds us of both Desiderius Erasmus and Pico della Mirandola but it was the latter who by hitting out at the “essentialist idea that man has a fixed and inalterable nature...anticipates Sartre’s claim that man must define himself” (51). Mirandola writes:

“A limited nature in other creatures is confined within the laws written down by us. In conformity with thy free judgement, in whose hands I have placed thee, thou art confined by no bounds and thou wilt fix limits of nature for thyself....Thou like a judge appointed for being honourable, art the moulder and

maker of thyself; thou mayest sculpt thyself into whatsoever shape thou dost prefer". (qtd. in Macquarrie 51)

It is therefore a specific historical crisis that inevitably breeds an existential cognition of life. A survey of the geo-political specifics of the 1950s will probably enable us to ascertain the crisis of the period, so that the applicability of the framework chosen may be convincingly argued.

As has been already observed, the cold war rhetoric was structured around the U.S manipulated definition of freedom which throughout the western alliance and particularly in Britain was interpreted in opposition to communism, or to be more precise anti-Stalinism. This in turn generated political quietism, since "literature is most itself in the Free World, both because of the shared attachment to freedom and because the free activity of literature will eschew political commitment" (Sinfield 158). North American New Critics aspired to engage with literary texts through a complete avoidance of external evidences, and as Sinfield reminds us, "the Abstract Expressionist's more or less random assault on the canvas seemed a graphic illustration of freedom" (159).

The English literary scenario was not much different from what has just been enumerated. In his introduction to *Interpretations*, a collection of essays on individual poems, John Wain, an eminent poet of the 1950s and a contemporary of Larkin claimed that the poems were engaged with as separate artifacts because "analysis can only concern itself with one object at a time". Herein lay the crisis as Sinfield quoting Christopher Lasch brings out: "The more intellectual purity identifies itself with 'value-free' investigations, the more it empties itself of political content and the easier it is for public officials to tolerate it: thus the state gains the cooperation of writers, teachers and artists not as paid propagandists or state censored time-servers but as free intellectuals capable of policing their own jurisdictions" (161). We understand that the aforesaid

crisis took place because reigning political ideology sought to subsume and annihilate subjectivity by way of hegemonizing the intellectual elite. The result is that the Foucauldian Panoptic with its all encompassing gaze operates but operates so pervasively that the much talked of freedom itself is undermined. It can therefore be logically anticipated that an existential approach will do justice not only to the emotional life of the poet but to his poetry as well.

It shall be seen that my objective in this introductory chapter was not simply a conventional exercise, devised to catalogue the predominant tendencies of Larkin criticism. On the other hand, the primary impulse was to question the dominant strands of the critical canon on the basis of their ideological moorings, so that the gaps and silences could be sufficiently recovered. Since the central problem that concerns me, is the quest for a new poetics of reading, such gaps and silences, shall probably yield fresh insights into the existing corpus of Larkin criticism.

In the second chapter, I examine the question of 'self' in Larkin's poetry. Dismantling the spate of biographical criticism that saw Larkin's poetic work as the direct offshoot of his lived experience, this chapter engages in a brief assessment of the reigning approaches by way of explaining the notion of the self. 'Subjectivist', 'social-relational', and 'narrativist' accounts of the self are weighed against one another, and in predilecting to opt for the 'existential' account, I have in accordance with my stated position, merely foregrounded the dictates of the genre under consideration. Barring the 'existentialist', almost all other approaches to the self posit or presume an apriori, which, I believe, is untenable with the self of poetry in general.

The third chapter of this dissertation is titled, 'Larkin and the Problem of Choice, Negation and Anguish'. The reason for aligning these three existential concepts is that they are intrinsically related to each other. Any exercise of choice brings in its wake the phenomenon of negation, while at the same time it is riddled with anxiety. Since the operation of choice

presupposes a man-world relationship, I have deliberately cushioned the problem of choice in Larkin's poetry, within the historical specificity of postwar England.

Larkin's perpetual torment, both as a man and as a poet by what he understood to be the meaninglessness of life is in essence the seat of the absurd and it is a direct consequence of the same man-world relationship alluded to earlier. In the fourth chapter, I therefore engage with a cross-section of Larkin's poems from a Camusean perspective, to show Larkin's appropriation of the same, as well as to locate any scope of agency that might lie embedded within them. The concluding chapter is in fact a brief expose, whereby I attempt to re-locate Larkin beyond the lurking critical canon. Quite in keeping with the general spirit of research, this dissertation will also demarcate probable areas through which the proliferation of the existential and absurdist discourse on Larkin's poetry may be successfully articulated.