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Larkin, pessimism, ambiguous, sense of falling.

INTRODUCTION:
Philip Arthur Larkin occupies an important place in the tradition of English poetry. He is one of the major British poets of the post-war era. The last lines in some famous poems like “An Arundel Tomb”, “Ambulances” and “The Whitsun Weddings” provide new dimensions. The last lines are highly ambiguous. Being an efficient artist, Larkin is aware of the clinching effect of a poem. The last lines are open-ended. The ending of a poem marks, as it were, a new beginning. Although the ‘mysterious’ last lines appear to bear positive meanings, in the ultimate analysis they befit Larkin’s pessimistic attitude towards life.

Abstract:
The present paper seeks to explore the significance of the last lines in select poems of Philip Larkin who is a major British poet of the post-war era. The last lines in some famous poems like “An Arundel Tomb”, “Ambulances” and “The Whitsun Weddings” provide new dimensions. The last lines are highly ambiguous. Being an efficient artist, Larkin is aware of the clinching effect of a poem. The last lines are open-ended. The ending of a poem marks, as it were, a new beginning. Although the ‘mysterious’ last lines appear to bear positive meanings, in the ultimate analysis they befit Larkin’s pessimistic attitude towards life.

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INTRODUCTION:
Philip Arthur Larkin occupies an important place in the tradition of English poetry. He is one of the major British poets of the post-war era. Critics are at loggerheads with each other about his status as a poet. Whereas some critics such as Kirkham, Tomlinson and Falck have pointed out some loopholes in Larkin’s poetry; some like Andrew Motion, Alan Jones and Donald Davie have eulogised his achievement as a poet. If John Wain, one of Larkin’s contemporary poets, considers him to be the ‘best’ poet in his time, Alun Jones opines in “The Poetry of Philip Larkin: A Note on Transatlantic Culture”:

It is in the poetry of Philip Larkin that the spirit of the 1950’s finds its most complete expression in English poetry (Jones, 145).

As a poet, Larkin’s reputation hinges on his four major volumes of poetry. His first published volume of poems was The North Ship (1945) where the influence of W. B. Yeats could be noticed. His next collection of poems was The Less Deceived which was published in 1955. His next volume of poetry was The Whitsun Weddings (1964) where the clear influence of Thomas Hardy could be seen. Some of his poems were published in two significant anthologies of the time - Poets of the 1950s (edited by D. J. Enright in 1950) and New Lines (edited by Robert Conquest in 1956). In the anthology New Lines (1956) Robert Conquest brings together some ‘Movement Poets’ – Donald Davie, John Holloway, Kingsley Amis, Philip Larkin and others – who were against their predecessors in their avoidance of modernist trends and their disdain of inordinate romanticism. Larkin’s poems bear testimony to this new group of poets. Larkin’s poems are concise, elegantly and economically descriptive, versatile in their use of forms, endlessly suggestive of deeper resonances in the scenes they paint. Perhaps more than this, it became evident from the reception of the poetry that Larkin was far more than a craftsman: that there was a profound affinity between the characteristic moods and tones of his poetry and the currents of feeling running through Britain itself in the forty years of his writing career (Punter, 5).

The present paper seeks to elucidate the significance of the last lines in some poems of Larkin. The last lines in the select poems of Larkin offer new dimensions, sudden twists and unexpected reversals of
the poet’s conceptions.

Analysis:

Larkin’s poem “An Arundel Tomb” from the volume of poems entitled The Whitsun Weddings apparently seems to be a poem that celebrates the dignity, profundity and majesty of love. To analyse the last lines one should at first try to discover the ambiguity of the poem. The poem was inspired by Larkin’s visit to Chichester Cathedral where he witnessed the gorgeous monument to the Earl of Arundel and his wife. In the poem, the earl and the countess ‘lie’ side by side holding hands which justify their mutual loyalty towards each other. Time has made its ruinous attack on the plain and unsophisticated (‘pre-baroque’) statues. Their faces have been ‘blurred’ by the swift flow of time. Their costumes are ‘vaguely shown’. All these ordinary descriptions of the earl and his wife hardly attract the eyes of a passer-by. Yet a passer-by would look with utmost care, ‘with a sharp tender shock’ at the statues as the Earl’s left hand has been shown as clutching the hand of his wife. In the third stanza the poet raises a question about their mutual attachment:

They would not think to lie so long.
Such faithfulness in effigy (Larkin, 110)

Although the lover and the beloved are faithful, it is ‘faithfulness’ in effigy and not in reality. Here the poet possibly mocks at the bond of the duo – the Earl and the Countess. The poet further adds that perhaps this attachment was an embellishment on the part of the sculptor. Therefore it cannot be real. Probably the couple could not have foreseen the deadly attack of ‘air’ that has silently been eroding the stone-statues. As a consequence, an ‘old tenantry’ or a viewer would only give a cursory glance over the carving. They would be able to ‘look’ at the statues without being able to ‘read’ properly. It is really interesting to note that the statues have survived, thereby ignoring the corrosive effect of time. A huge number of people have come to wash at the ‘identity’ of the couple. Now the two figures have lost their significance to the modern visitors. They have become as unsubstantial as a trough of smoke. What is interesting to note that though they have become tiny fragments of history, their reciprocal love, or to put it more appropriately, ‘an attitude’ lasts forever. In the final stanza the poet once again proceeds to describe the insuperable and insurmountable power of time:

Time has transfigured them into
Untruth. ... (Larkin, 111)

The statues have undergone a sea-change. But it is ironical to note that the statues have been transformed into ‘untruth’. Even if the poet speaks of mutual allegiance, it is only ‘stone fidelity’ – an expression which reminds one of Keats’ famous phrases ‘Cold Pastoral’ in “Ode on a Grecian Urn”. This ‘stone fidelity’ is something that they ‘hardly meant’. So the insinuation is that their mutual affection is only an appearance without any aura of truthfulness.

...The stone fidelity
They hardly meant has come to be
Their final blazon, and to prove
Our almost-instinct almost true:
What will survive of us is love (Larkin, 111).

The last line seems to carry an affirmative meaning. Sisir Kumar Chatterjee describes that the poem “ends on a rhapsodic note of affirmation about the eternal validity of love” (Chatterjee, 224). But there is also a note of scepticism and dubiety expressed in the last line. John Saunders assets, “the tomb may not really mean what it seems to mean, that what we would like to take as a beautiful, comforting ‘truth’ about love, is in fact a deception.” (Saunders, 47) Christopher Ricks avers – “If you were to stress both ‘survive’ and ‘us’, the line would not survive the plethora of the line and a word in wording but not in intonation, occupy exactly the same space.” (Ricks, 122). Ricks further points out that the last line is charged with “apophthegmatic weight of classical art” (Ricks, 276). The aphoristic last line is so appealing and so vibrating that it defies time and defies love. The last line thus seems to be ambiguous. As Chatterjee explains:

The phrase “almost-instinct almost true” indeed implies that the joined hands may almost be a true
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statement because the mason’s instinct for what would best represent his subject merges with the modern
observer’s example of a “perennial human need to believe in love – a need the poet here acknowledges even
while refusing to give his assent to it (Chatterjee, 227).” Andrew Swarbrick says – “What will survive us is not love, but time itself as it progresses onwards
from us into the future. The conclusion, although unsentimental, is yet far from bleak. In the context of the
poem’s development, it is consolatory and compassionate. The final line stands as an assertion to which the
poet cannot give complete assent. But it represents an ideal which, even if we fall short of it, ennobles us. In
a structure of reality that refuses to accommodate our dreams and desires, that is flawed, painful and
disillusioning, ‘almost’ may be the best for which we can hope” (Swarbrick, 71). Many critics have also
asserted that the line and a half before the final line seem to evaluate the real meaning of the last line. The
optimistic message of the poem seems to be subverted by the existence of the two ‘almost’. Further, the
word ‘untruth’ in the last stanza refutes all positive associations. The remark of Larkin at the end of the
draft of the poem would be grand. A perceptive reader can easily sense that even if the poet watches the scene with
rapt attention, there is a sense of detached aloofness on the part of the poet. Although the women have

Success so huge and wholly farcical;
The women shared
The secret like a happy funeral; (Larkin, 115)

This social success is great and yet at the same time ridiculous. Huge success cannot be farcical; rather it is grand. A perceptive reader can easily sense that even if the poet watches the scene with

enjoyed a quantum of pleasure, it seems to the poet that they have come to experience a ‘happy funeral’ – the
oxymoronic phrase which marks a sense of departure. Here the nexus between life and death is
conspicuous. This ominous association of marriage and death is also found in Tony Morrison. The girls
meditate upon ‘a religious wounding’. Ultimately they become ‘free’ and yet ‘loaded’ with the occupants.
Larkin thus plays with words by using conflicting and contradictory ideas. The word ‘free’ is a loaded word.
It may mean relief from emotional pressure and comfort from the bondage of the past. The poet’s attitude is
full of ambiguity. That the poet’s attitude somewhat begins to change is evident from the use of the plural
‘we’ instead of ‘I’. The poet feels a sense of attachment when he emphatically proclaims that ‘we’ meaning
both the poet as well as newly-married couples ‘hurried’ towards London. Andrew Swarbrick’s observation
seems to be pertinent here:

A poem that began with his sense of isolation then amused detachment shifting to distaste and now
a closer involvement, ends with moving compassion (Swarbrick, 51).

Thus the poem is a mixture of attachment and detachment, association and dissociation. The
newly-married couples are so overcome with their own happiness that they did not think of others:

...    and none
Thought of the others they would never meet
Or how their lives would all contain this hour (Larkin, 116)

The poet now envisages the city’s postal districts packed like ‘squares of wheat’ - an image suggestive of
abundance, fertility and fruitfulness. Thus the image of ‘squares of wheat’ carries positive message. As the
train moves speedily towards London the poet is confronted with the walls of ‘blackened moss’. The ‘frail’
journey now comes to an end:

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

The word ‘swelled’ stands for plenitude. The last line is redolent of Larkin’s ambivalent attitude.
According to the critic P. R. King the arrow shower image refers to “the new lives of the couples shooting
forth into London and falling upon a life of new hope and happiness like a shower of rain bringing forth new
stalks of wheat”. Rain is usually a symbol of fertility and regeneration. Therefore the image suggests
procreative and regenerative power. As Swarbrick points out:

That it is an image of procreation and growth is made clear by the ‘shower...rain’ metaphor of
fertility. This is the power ‘That being changed can give’: the progress towards happiness and fulfilment is
undertaken even if its achievement is ‘out of sight’, unforeseen and uncertain. (Swarbrick, 52).

That the poem indeed ends on a positive note is confirmed by Larkin’s own assertion to Anthony Thwaite:

That the poem was intended to end on a joyous, exultant note is corroborated by Larkin’s
instructions to Anthony Thwaite as to how the poem should be read aloud – a “level, even a plodding,
descriptive note, until the mysterious last lines, when the poem should suddenly ‘lift off the ground.”
“Success or failure of the poem,” Larkin insisted, “depends on whether it gets off the ground on the last two
lines.” (qtd. in Chatterjee, 239)

Thus the ending of the poem is apparently affirmative. There is a suggestion of transcendence. As
the rain-drops fall on the grounds and nourish the fields of wheat, similarly the newly-wed couples will start
new lives in different parts of London. Larkin himself acknowledges that the arrows shot by the English
bowmen in Laurence Olivier’s film “Henry V” inspire him to write the last two lines. It is to be noted that
though rain is generally taken to be a symbol of fruition, in Larkin rain emblematises tragedy. According to
Thwaite, rain in Larkin’s poem does not always mean happiness. Rain, on the other hand, suggests tragedy
or unfulfilment. That the poem bears negative implications is evident from the use of some words and
expressions like ‘frail’, ‘coincidence’, ‘blackened moss’, ‘happy funeral’, ‘unreally’, ‘farical’, ‘sense of falling’ and ‘someone running up to bowl’. All these may suggest incompleteness. Barbara Everett also puts
stress on the negative ending of the poem. She speaks about the “dying-fall sadness of the poem’s gathered-
in ending. Rain begins; London arrives; the journey is over; Eden closes”(Everett, 253). Swarbrick states:

The poem is not so sentimental as to suggest that these couples will find contentment. Rather, the
journey itself is used as a metaphor for time and change (Swarbrick, 52).

Thus the ending of the poem seems ambiguous. The ending is open-ended for one does not know where this
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arrow shower will land.
Larkin is a pessimistic poet. One of the fine examples of Larkin’s nihilism is found in
“Ambulances” – a poem which shows Larkin’s preoccupation with death and suffering. The very sight of an
ambulance is frightening and frightful. It creates repulsion in the beholders. What the poet captures in the
poem is the randomness and inevitability of death:

... the unique random blend
Of families and fashions, there
At last begin to loosen ... (Larkin, 132)
The ending of the poem is tinged with melancholy and gloom:

And dulls to distance all we are (Larkin, 132).

But there are some poems like “Wedding wind”, “Coming”, “Here” and “Water” which seems to
end with a possibility of satisfaction. In the poem “Church Going” the poet’s attitude changes from
scepticism to affirmation as he finally realizes the real significance of visiting a church. Again in the
poem “Maiden Name” the poet ultimately recognizes the deeper significance of the woman’s maiden name.
The ending of the poem “Reasons for Attendance” strikes a note of scepticism and dubiety.

CONCLUSION:

Larkin is a conscious artisan. He is aware of the ultimate effect of a poem. He believes that a poem
should be completely rounded at the end. The last lines are highly ambiguous. They are open-ended. But
actually this is not an end. The ending can lead to infinite possibilities. The ending is the new beginning. The
last lines are indeed “mysterious”. Under the veneer of promise and fulfilment, poems like “An Arundel Tomb”, “Ambulances” and “The Whitsun Weddings” ultimately betray signs of disintegration and incoherence. There is a “sense of falling” to borrow an expression from “The Whitsun Weddings”. Thus even if Larkin describes love, it is only a deception of love. To conclude it may be said that the last lines in some of the poems of Larkin probably conform to his pessimistic outlook towards life.

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In the poetry of Philip Larkin, we may presume that with his descriptions of a very particular desolate Hull, and his humanist approach to life, he is a poet that writes very much from a viewpoint of the Self. If we look a little closer, however, we find this is not the case. In Larkin's discussion of his poem 'Absences' we witness a rare admittance from the poet himself on the matter of summoning the Other, in order to write what he, in characteristic pseudo-humility claims, is quite simply 'better' poetry. The last line, for instance, sounds like a slightly unconvincing translation from a French symbolist. I wish I could write like this more often.