



A Poetic Record of Life

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Abstract

Presented here is a discussion of the poet Philip Larkin, with regard to his poetry as a truthful record of life. Simple and even childish as Larkin's poetry may seem, it is quite often astonishingly complicated and profound, which is actually life itself.

Key words: Philip Larkin; Collected Poems; Simplicity and preciseness

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I wrote poems to preserve things I have seen/thought/felt (if I may so indicate a composite and complex experience) both for myself and for others, though I feel that my prime responsibility is to the experience itself, which I am trying to keep from oblivion for its own sake. Why I should do this I have no idea, but I think the impulse to preserve lies at the bottom of all art. (Larkin, 2003)

Here Philip Larkin tells us not only why he wrote but also how he wrote. Modest as he was, Larkin did believe that his poems belong to the types of artistic work which will gain a life of their own because they are a truthful record of life itself. Indeed reading his Collected Poems brings us exactly the same feeling as Larkin himself has expressed. The more than three hundred short poems collected in the book cover almost all possible themes of human experiences, especially those universal as well as controversial themes like religion, modernism and science, love, sex and marriage, life and death. They are

certainly not as magnificent as Homer's epics, nor as beautiful as Shakespeare's sonnets, but they are so true to life, and so familiar to us that we often see them in ourselves, our families and friends, and even the whole human race. Talking about the personal traits of Larkin's poetry, Bedient says,

His poetry seems not only the necessary expression of his temperament but the very voice of his view of things, the pure expression of his aim—His purpose being not to make sterility whirl but precisely to make it stand still, freed from confusion, from the human fevers that oppose it. Far from adhering piously to English poetic tradition, he uses it for his own ends. The result, in any case, is a poetry of mixed formality and informality, mixed severity and charm, mixed humors and pathos, that carries a unique personal impression—A poetry that for all its conservatism, is unconsciously, inimitably new.

Bedient is right. While Larkin's poems are known for being direct, simple, precise, non-traditional and occasionally even childish, the readers are very often shocked by their complication and profoundness. And I believe that this mixed style of Larkin's poetry also derives from his "wish to preserve things," because human experiences are, like Larkin's poems, sometimes so simple and smooth, and sometimes so complex and confusing.

In one of his shortest and best-known poems "Days", Larkin, as a great observer and artist, shows how he can preserve life as it is in his literary creations.

"What are days for?"
 Days are where we live.
 They come, they wake us
 Time and time over.
 They are to be happy in:
 Where can we live but days?
 Ah, solving that question
 Brings the priest and the doctor.
 In their long coats
 Running over the fields."
 (CP, p.67)

Coming to the end of the first stanza, I could not but burst out “yes” to the poet. “What are days for? The question sounds most difficult and complicated to every one of us. While we are searching in our mind for an answer, Larkin surprises us with his so simple but convincing description—“Days are where we live... They are to be happy in,” which may make us pat our heads and say, “How can I fail to see this simple truth?” then when we move to the second stanza, we cannot help laughing at our own foolish worries and fussiness over such a simple question. We call for priests and doctors only to produce more confusion. Here Larkin obviously wrote down what he had “seen/thought/ felt” about life not only for himself but for all of us. Though some critics call him a pessimist or a nihilist, he seems in this poem to take life much easier than most of us.

Larkin’s keen understanding and vivid presentation of life very often comes to us as a shock through his poems. Some, like “Days” surprise us with their simplicity and preciseness; others may occupy our minds for days because of their profound and philosophical ideas like “Next, Please”:

Always too eager to the future, we
Pick up bad habits of expectancy.
Something is always approaching every day
Till then we say,

Watching from a bluff the tiny, clear,
Sparking armada of promises draw near.
How slow they are! And how much time
they waste,
Refusing to make haste!

Yet still they leave us holding wretched stalks
Of disappointment, for, though nothing balks
Each big approach, leaning with brass-work prinked,
Each rope distinct,

Flagged, and the figurehead with golden tits
Arching our way, it never anchors; it’s
No sooner present than it turns to past...
Right to the last

We think each one will heave to and unload
All good into our lives, all we are owed
For waiting so devoutly and so long.
But we are wrong:

Only one ship is seeking us, a black—
Sailed unfamiliar, towing at her back
A huge and birdless silence. In her wake
No waters breed or break.(CP, p.52)

Instead of saying “yes” or nodding our heads at reading the poem, we keep asking ourselves “Is it true?”

The question may bring us back to the poem time and again, and the more we read it, the more truthful it sounds. As Larkin points out, human beings are “Always too eager for future,” because the future, to us, always has more possibilities and so appears more attractive than the present. But what does the future really mean to us? We actually seldom think about it seriously, not because we are too ignorant, but because we don’t like to, for fear that we should see only more unfulfilled hopes and more disappointment. However, Larkin, as a preserver of truth, forces us to face what we refuse to see by ourselves. The poem reminds me of the feelings that once came to me when I was in a graveyard. While I was looking around at the tombstones and wondering what kind of people they had been, rich or poor, happy or sad, successful or a failure, an idea suddenly struck me: whoever we are, we’ll all have this same future some day—lying in a silent place like this without showing any of our identities. The poem surely does not make us feel happy, neither do we necessarily feel pessimistic. The only difference it makes is that it helps us see the truth.

One of Larkin’s poems which I’m particularly fond of is his “Ignorance”:

Strange to know nothing, never to be sure
Of what is true or right or so I feel,
Or well, it does seem so;
Someone must know,

Strange to be ignorant of the way things work:
Their skill at finding what they need,
And willingness to change;
Yes, it is strange,

Even to wear such knowledge—for our flesh
Surrounds us with its own decisions—
and yet spend all our life on impressions,
That when we start to die
Have no idea why.(CP, p.107)

I like this poem because it coincides with what I vaguely feel sometimes but never know how to exactly express. I wonder whether pious people are also bothered by the same problems or not, but I do feel that non-believers have more trouble with them. We don’t believe the religious explanations about ourselves or about the world around us, neither are we totally satisfied with what we already have as the answers. To us, nature remains a mystery; we ourselves are a mystery; life is a mystery. Larkin seems to be saying here that human beings are pathetic things because we are too ignorant.

I’m not surprised after a study of Larkin’s poems that he became one of the most popular English poets. In his poetry, he is sometimes wild, humorous, even ridiculous, and sometimes quiet, philosophical and profound, but

whatever he is talking about, whatever tone he has assumed, he always tells the truth. I don't like the labels critics have imposed on him. How can anybody deny "Where can we live but days," or "Only one ship is seeking us, a black,/ Sailed unfamiliar, towing at her back/ A huge and birdless silence. In her wake/ No waters breed or break," or "That when we start to die/ Have no idea why?" We cannot simply call a poet pessimist because he shows us what we don't like to see, or label him as a nihilist when he has us face the reality

that there is really not much to make us feel cheerful in this modern world. And I believe it is his wish and ability to preserve truth that has made Larkin so unique as a poet.

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