

**THE INDETERMINATE PHILIP LARKIN AND HIS HAPLESS POETIC MUSE**

Avijit Chakraborty  
Asst Prof in English  
N.B.S Mahavidyalaya  
Jaigaon, West Bengal  
*poribrajak@yahoo.co.in*

**Abstract**

*Philip Larkin (1922-1985), arguably the most dominant poetic voice in English Poetry, in the post- Auden era had been traditionally read as a poet whose work merely reflects life in an uncomplicated way. This paper is therefore an attempt to re-read some of his poems against the grain of fixed ideas attendant upon them. Diligent reading will show that here is a poet, who, even before the onset of Postmodernism wrote poetry that is disturbingly close to postmodern indefiniteness or indeterminacy.*

The dehumanization of literature from the 1960s onwards, initiated by divergent critical orientations grouped together under the umbrella term post modernism, has sought to view 'indeterminacy' ---- an oft-quoted symptom of the aforesaid system of aesthetics ---- as a typically linguistic phenomenon. Criticism being dominated essentially by structural concerns, the poet became an author, and literary text a site marked by each signifier's relentless, but futile move towards a transcendental signified leading to indeterminacy. On the other hand the history and genealogy of post modernism confirms the presence of this indeterminacy on the humanistic level of the cognitive as well. Whereas modernism tried to capture reality through individual consciousness equivalent to life itself, for post modernism reality is just an incoherent and deluding notion. Against the modernist obsession with wholeness and unity, post modernism celebrates a radical indeterminacy.

Far from merely regarding it as a series of disjunctive symptoms which struck the philosophic/aesthetic realm in the late 1960s, the origin of post modern indeterminacy has to be sought in the specific historicity of the west. And once we try to effect that move, what primarily appears as the cause of post modern indeterminacy is an absolute lack of anchor, owing largely to the loss of essentialist certitudes in all capacities of life- social, political, spiritual and the like.

A sense of negation took over, and in philosophy--albeit French philosophy--this negation assumed the form of a skepticism which was directed, as Stuart Sim claims in his essay, 'Post Modernism and Philosophy', towards "authority, received wisdom, cultural and political norms etc, which puts it into a long running tradition in western thought that stretches back to classical Greek philosophy" (3)

In the socio-political realm, the question of indeterminacy was fundamentally a resultant of the subversion of 'meta-narratives' in favour of a comparatively disjointed and fragmented notion of reality, which coincided with the rejection of Marxism as an essentialist political discourse, at the hands of Jean Francois Lyotard in 1968. The Paris 'Evenements' is normally regarded as a signal event which compelled philosophers like Lyotard, Baudrillard, Deleuze and Guattari to veer away from the grand narratives of Marxism, and seek refuge in what Lyotard called 'petit recit' or micro narratives of life. Could it therefore be inferred that this predilection for the flux instead of the coherent whole was in a large measure responsible for ushering in the note of indeterminacy? Possibly it could, had not the criterion of indeterminacy been a necessary adjunct to an erstwhile hermeneutic practice.

It will be remembered that the subversion of essentialist discourses commenced with Soren Kierkegaard who initiated what is today called the philosophy of 'suspicion'. Nietzsche advanced the cause substantially as did thinkers like Karl Jaspers, Martin Heidegger and Gabriel Marcel. In fact it was Heidegger's blatant rejection of anthropocentrism, followed by Sartre's absolute negation of the essential cognitive self that debunked essence and paved the way for the intrusion of the variable as subjects of discourse. The determined self being lost, determination as a conscious activity was eschewed and pleasure sought in the celebration of indeterminacy.

The present paper is an attempt to re-read some of Philip Larkin's poems, against the grain of fixed ideas attendant upon the form and meaning of the text. It is my contention; that, if carefully read, Larkin's poetry will enable us to regard him as a contemporary master of indefiniteness, who, much before the onset of the postmodern rigmarole, wrote poetry that is disturbingly close to post-modernist indeterminacy. In my reading I have primarily chosen poems written prior to 1968, the year historically accepted to be the starting point of post modernism.

I am however aware of a feasible objection that might be raised at this stage. Bearing in mind Larkin's much professed insularity towards anything foreign, how far can the events enumerated earlier be said to have conditioned his poetry? To which I answer by saying that the sheer magnitude of these events were such that it would practically have been impossible for Larkin to escape their impact. Moreover Richard Palmer in the very preface to his book length study on the poet entitled *Such Deliberate Disguises: The Art of Philip Larkin* had succinctly argued, how Larkin the man used numerous masks to carefully nurture and shape the poet he was to become (14), and judged from that perspective his public reaction can be

construed as a provocative posture. However, even if one were to eschew these facts as external evidences, I posit that the thread of indeterminacy hovering around Larkin's poetry can be viewed from the vantage point of what I have already referred to as the loss of an essential poetic self.

Mr. Andrew Motion in his introduction to *Philip Larkin- A writer's Life*, talks of the contradictions in Larkin's will, which I believe goes a long way in etching the parameters of my argument. In relation to Larkin's published and unpublished work, he has pointed out quoting Neil Lyndon, 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 ). Also Richard Bradford in his biography of the poet entitled *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 could not summon the will to go to the restroom and relieve himself (Ward 623). What is however surprising is that instead of seeing in it a fundamental pattern of existence Bradford goes on to structure this apparent behavioral aberration through the paradigmatic construct of Larkin's cogito. Seldom does it occur to him that the poetic self – that much talked of beacon of coherence and unity- could in the case of this poet have been impaired to such an extent, as to make meaningful action impossible. One therefore wonders whether or not the much talked of indeterminacy was a constituent essence of Larkin's poetic temperament. Furthermore, if the problem of choice confronting Larkin the man remained unresolved, the same is probably true of Larkin the poet. The inevitable result is an anxiety of an existential kind from which there is no escape.

Post modernism being a predominantly Franco-American enterprise, little of what it entailed, affected England in a pervasive way. When it did, much of its effect became perceptible in the realm of drama and fiction where the now popular phrase 'anything goes' led to the incorporation of diverse architectonics of the craft. Poetry on the other hand, showed no overt symptoms of appropriation of those post modern principles. The loose poetry movement that took place in the 1960s and 70s, which was termed 'The British Poetry Revival', was a modernist – inspired reaction to what was felt to be the Movement's conservative approach to British poetry. Much of what was written by poets of the 60s and 70s are today regarded as minor poetry, so much so, that Philip Larkin who started writing in the 40s, and integrated in his own idiosyncratic manner the subtle nuances of subsequent decades, is unequivocally regarded as the most representative English poet since the Second World War. It would therefore be interesting to assess the way in which his poetry can be said to be aligned to the post modern ethos.

Embedded within the socio-political factuality of the 1950s, 'Mr Bleaney' (1955) is a poem pervaded by a nagging sense of the circularity of existence, and a consequent stasis which is worked out in metaphoric terms. A rented room with its scant material exigency is all that binds the poetic persona to Mr Bleaney, and gradually but steadily one finds the living of the speaker coalesce somewhat disturbingly with the living of Mr Bleaney:

**...So it happens that I lie**

where Mr Bleaney lay, and stub my fags  
on the same saucer – souvenir, and try  
Stuffing my ears with cotton-wool, to drown  
The jabbering set he egged her on to buy. (10-14)

The subject of the poem along with the year of its conception -1955- shall remind an informed reader of the economic slump that hit England in that decade, provoking such general indeterminism as is found in Osbornne's *Look back in Anger* or Kingsley Amis' *Lucky Jim*. Indeterminacy there as also in 'Mr Bleaney' are off shoots of social iniquity, and this becomes explicit in the final eight lines of the poem:

**But if he stood and watched the frigid wind**

Tousling the clouds, lay on the fusty bed  
Telling himself that this was home, and grinned  
And shivered, without shaking of the dread  
That how we live measures our own nature  
And at his age having no more to show  
Than one hired box should make him pretty sure  
He warranted no better, I don't know (21-28)

Mr. David Lodge in his essay entitled 'Philip Larkin: The metonymic muse' has commented upon Larkin's manipulation of language that creates this sense of futility terminating in incertitude. I quote him at some length:

The diction is plain and simple but the syntax, subordinate clauses burgeoning and negatives accumulating bewilderingly, is extremely complex and creates a sense of helplessness and entrapment. The main clause so long delayed – 'I don't know' – when it finally comes, seems to spread back dismally through the whole poem, through the whole life of the unhappy man who utters it. ( 80)

Indeterminacy with Philip Larkin is predominantly ontological, and is the confounding irresolution of the problem of choice confronting the self. 'Days', a ten-line poem from 'The Whitsun Wedding' starts with an attempt to define the subject, accompanied by a move towards stabilization in the line, "where can we live but day's?" (5) But the second stanza changes direction. And the determinacy toward which the poem had been moving soon gives way to chaos and confusion.

**Ah, solving that question**

Brings the priest and the doctor

In their long coats

Running over the fields. (7-10)

The anguished 'ah' undoubtedly goes on to register a pre-occupation with death but more than that, the words 'priest' and 'doctor' evolve as symbolic projections of theological certitudes vying with empirical science for dominion. The result is an ontological stasis opening up the fissure of discord and the problem of choice confronting contemporary humanity. Further note, that Stasis, confusion or indeterminacy – be that as it may -- is effected by Larkin in a peculiar way – namely by shifting the focus from the co-ordinates of 'Time' in the 1<sup>st</sup> stanza to the co-ordinates of infinite space in the 2<sup>nd</sup>. The reader is thrust head-long into the void of the empty fields, and such emptiness as Becket's plays have amply displayed may be intensely claustrophobic at times.

Precisely this mode of operation may be evinced in a poem entitled 'High Windows', of course, written much later in 1967. The first four stanzas create a persona afflicted with the disappointment of unfulfilled promises. However speculations about the new generation's chances of happiness assures him that he might once have been similarly envied. The stanzas vacillate ceaselessly between hope and frustration only to provoke a conclusion that is characteristically in-conclusive:

Rather than words comes the thought of high windows;

The Sun – comprehending glass,

And beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows

Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless. (17-20)

There is transcendence implied here, but this transcendence terminates in nihilism.

It should not be surmised; however, that indeterminacy was a temporary phase in Larkin's poetry. 'The Explosion', written as late as 1970, starts with innumerable snap shot like montages in the typical modernist rendition of the quiet preceding an explosion. The first four stanzas peculiarly Eliotic in tone is designed to capture visually, and of course colloquially, the mundaneness of provincial life, with overtones of existential stasis attending upon it. Incertitude however creeps into the poem, it seems to me, regarding the question of the Church services meant to pacify the bereaved families of the dead. Larkin writes:

**The dead go on before us, they**

Are Sitting in God's house in comfort,

We shall see them face to face –

**Plain as lettering in the chapels**

It was said, and for a second

Wives saw men of the explosion



consequent vacuity somewhat in line with Albert Camus' preoccupation with the absurd. In fact, Larkin's penchant for the much repeated Wildean dictum 'only mediocrities develop' can be construed in terms of the circularity and immutability of life that he perceived to be the general human condition. Yet hardly any western scholar has elaborately critiqued this facet of Larkin's poetry compelling us to suspect a politics of representation involved in the matter. For a philosophical system that has historically been empirical, an acceptance of the existentialist position seems highly improbable. Throughout this article, I have therefore deliberately used the generic term existentialist instead of the more systemic 'Existentialism' since that would inevitably resurrect the Sartrean ghost, who since the cold war had been consigned to oblivion on charges of being aligned with Stalinist orthodoxy. But does that mean that we should preclude the poetry of Philip Larkin from a critical intervention that it rightly deserves?

Unable to constitute the world as a unity, the German Existentialist philosopher Karl Jaspers once said: "This limitation leads me to myself, where I can no longer withdraw behind an objective point of view...where neither I myself nor the existence of others can any longer become an object for me" (O'Brien 8). Reflecting upon this Albert Camus approbatively concedes that "Jaspers was evoking after many others those waterless deserts..." (O'Brien 8), but immediately quips in by saying: "After many others, yes indeed, but how eager they were to get out of them...The real effort is to stay there...and to examine closely the odd vegetation of those distant regions" (O'Brien 8). Is this not something that Philip Larkin has attempted to do in poem after poem?

Virginia Woolf's cognition of life as a 'luminous halo', Eliot's 'objective correlative' and Joyce's 'Epiphany' offer glimpses of reality. Larkin's poetry on the other hand defamiliarizes the world, whereby it is merely seen rather than recognized as a structured unity. Needless to say, what obstructs that recognition is a vacuity confounding Larkin's ontological existence, something similar to what Yeats perceived, when he said in a poem entitled 'What Then?',

'The work is done', grown old he thought,  
'According to my boyish plan;  
Let the fools rage, I swerved in naught,  
Something to perfection brought';  
*But louder sang that ghost, 'what then?'* (16-20)



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