Self-Alienation in the Poetry of Philip Larkin

Assis. Prof. Alaa Abdulhussein Hashim, Ph.D
Assis. Inst. Saad Mohammed Kadhum, MA

Department of English
College of Education
University of Basra

In his biography of Philip Larkin (1922-1985), Andrew Motion (1993) believes that Larkin, in his poem, "Self's the Man" wants to say that "What will survive of us[…] is not love but the wish to love—and indelible signs of how the wish has been frustrated"(290). This frustration, which Larkin suffered from at his childhood and adolescence, seems to be a main reason behind the growing sense of self-alienation he passed through in his adulthood. Larkin admits that the emotions of childhood did not come naturally to him, and showing feelings of love was forbidden at home (Larkin, 1983:48). Moreover, he admits, "Probably both my parents were rather shy people—of each other, of their children" (ibid., 48). In his review of Larkin's poetry, David C. Ward (2006) states, "Larkin did stutter as a young adult […] by an overwhelming passivity and self-abnegation in the face of whatever situation faced him" (625). Ward also believes that "Larkin's life and poems embody Martin Heidegger's theory of 'the absence of presence'" (ibid., 625). Whereas Charles Tomlinson (1957), in his Review of Larkin's poetry, describes Larkin as "a mild xenophobe" who "abominates Mozart, and never goes abroad" (Cited in Hibbett, 2008: 125). Hibbett concludes, "Larkin and his fellow Movement Poets […] are severely limited by their self-awareness" (ibid., 127). This sense of dissociation, absence and passivity is, for example, shown in his poem "Poetry of Departures" (1954) in which he states a known reality but it conceals a deep belief in his mind anyway; he states that we do not "all hate home/ And having to be there"* (105). The childhood and adolescence that have denied

Larkin love and integration surely have been one important reason behind his pessimistic outlook and his alienation from the social life.

But we cannot deny that Larkin does have a philosophical mind that comprehends the world around him idiosyncratically. He seems to be uncertain about his identity, which increases his self-alienation. That uncertainty has a bearing on his poetry that comes to be, as Geary (2007) states "a record" of his "self- interrogation" (385). Nevertheless, Keith Tuma (2001) admits that Larkin is "the most widely celebrated and arguably the finest poet of the Movement, a group of English poets that emerged in the 1950s and set the terms for much of the poetry of the next several decades"(445). Moreover, Richard Murphy (2006) identifies certain qualities that, as he observes, stamp Larkin's poetry; they are, "rigorous intellectual clarity, astringent wit, classical regularity in metre and rhyme, with blunt, disillusioned post-war common sense" (71).

Larkin has been seen as a poet who projects stable and apparent realities of life, so Gardner (1973) thinks that Larkin writes for everybody "in the language of ordinary people, using the accepted sense of words and using the accepted grammatical constructions(12). Trevor Tolley (1991) infers that what is characteristic of Larkin's poetry is "a perspective reinforced by the tightly containing rationality and the clear sense that reality, in common sense, is what it seems to be" (200). In fact, Larkin's poetry reflects that what is real and what is unreal are not clear. Moreover, his poetry reflects unfamiliarity or rather confusion in his perception of the world. In contrast to Tolley's previous opinion, we can infer from Larkin's poems that reality, as he sees it, is not what it seems to be, and that reality is unseen by almost all people. In spite of that, Larkin has the courage to face naked reality, but only when he is isolated. That is clearly revealed in "Best Society" (1951):

I lock my door.
The gas fire breathes. The wind outside
Ushers in evening rain.
Once more
Uncontradicting solitude
Supports me on its giant palm;
And like a sea-anemone

Or simple snail, there cautiously
Unfolds, emerges, what I am. (CP, 56-7)

Larkin has himself understood that he could not have been able throughout his career as a poetry-maker to attract all people to his poems because he knew that it was not easy to comprehend the minds of people, or rather to disclose their hearts. So in "Mr. Bleany" (1955), the speaker, who represents Larkin, fails to identify himself with Mr. Bleany although the latter seems simple and uneducated and the images that project his life reflect his hollowness and desolateness. The speaker admits at the end of the poem, "I don't Know."

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 off 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. (CP, 61)

It seems that Larkin feels that he cannot reach his audience. This is symbolically shown in "At Grass" (1950) in which he shows us two old horses lingering at pasture. While he reminisces on the horses' glorious past, he refers to their retiring present. In the present, the horses are described in these lines:

The eye can hardly pick them out
From the cold shade they shelter in,
The wind distresses tail and main. (CP, 83)

But in the past their state was completely different.

Two dozen distances surficed
To fable them: faint afternoons
Of cups and stakes and handicaps,

Whereby their names were artificed
To inlay faded, classic Junes. (CP, 83)

Words like ‘fable,’ ‘cups,’ ‘stakes,’ ‘handicaps’ and ‘artificed’ allude to a career of literary fame, and this supports an interpretation of the poem that emphasizes on Larkin’s fear of losing his fame or audience.

There is another fear in Larkin’s life, which results from the inability of time to engender what man expects from it in man’s life, so in “Next, Please” (1951), he shows how we —like Beckett’s characters in “Waiting for Godot” (1948) —wait for something that is not coming.

Always too eager for the future, we
Pick up bad habits of expectancy.
Something is always approaching. (CP, 89)

This expectancy is definitely fruitless and the “armada of promises”(89) of time will never reach the port, and “Yet still they leave us holding wretched stalks/ Of disappointment” (89). That armada of life and promises “never anchors; it’s/ No sooner present than it turns to past” (89). Unlike S. T. Coleridge’s ship in his poem, “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” (1834), which saves its occupants at the end, Larkin’s armada does not reach its port. Larkin’s outlook is melancholic and pessimistic, so the ship described here is a ship of death:

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, 89)

If the ship in “Next, Please” (1951) is a symbol for the trip of life, the train in “The Whitsun Weddings” (1958) is also a symbol referring to the same trip of life. In the

first poem, there is no hope and it ends into nothing, and 'No waters breed or break,'(89) while in the second, there is still hope and "A sense of falling, like an arrow shower/ Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain" (CP, 102).

In "The Whitsun Weddings" (1958), the poet describes a train journey. The train passes through small towns and villages. At each station, wedding parties bidding farewell to couples who go aboard the train. The speaker curiously watches the parties, and later on reflects on what he has seen. He feels that people are wholly absorbed in the goings-on of the weddings, while he is only a passive observer who stands aloof thinking deeply of what he considers meaningless in these incidents. In fact, the speaker estranges himself from all the entertainment and celebration of life, and his share in the social activities seems unreal and transient.

> …, walls of blackened moss
> Came close, and it was nearly done, this frail
> Travelling coincidence. (CP, 114)

He tries to speculate over the newly-weds and to establish contact with people, but suddenly the distance between him and people increases. He will not see them as individuals; he will rather stereotype them and they will rather look distasteful.

> The fathers with broad belts under their suits
> And seamy foreheads; mothers loud and fat;
> An uncle shouting smut; and then the perms,
> The nylon gloves and jewellery-substitutes,
> The lemons, mauves, and olive-ochres that
> Marked off the girls unreally from the rest. (114)

Reading his description of these people reflects that he considers them vulgar. His observation and comments show his sense of distinction and aloofness.

It is noticed that the hallmark of Larkin's poetry is frustration, detachment and hopelessness, which lead to melancholy and deliberate self-alienation. He fails to

build social and emotional connections with people. Therefore, in "Places, Loved Ones" (1954), he seems unable to incorporate himself within people or the place.

> To find such seems to prove
> You want no choice in where
> To build, or whom to love;
> You ask them to bear
> You off irrevocably,
> So that it's not your fault
> Should the town turn dreary,
> The girl a dolt. (CP, 99)

Moreover, he sees the world as disintegrated, fearful and indifferent. He also feels that social connections restrict his individuality. David Holbrook sees that Larkin "can find no flow of warmth between himself and us, or his subjects" (171). In "Dockery and Son" (1963), the speaker wonders whether this world is worthwhile because "Life is first boredom, then fear/ Whether or not we use it, it goes (CP, 153). This poem is an interior monologue in which, like in "Church Going" (1954), Larkin begins with commonplace details and ends into contemplation on life. In "Dockery and Son," his ideas about death expose the fragility of life. He begins the poem narrating and describing the incident of visiting his old college in which he will know that the son of his old friend, Dockery is now in the college. As he goes back home, he begins to contemplate on life. He makes it clear that life leads people to different ends. And he states that he has gone in a state of 'numbness' at realizing what estranging himself from others has led to:

> To have no son, no wife,
> No house or land still seemed quite natural.
> Only a numbness registered the shock
> Of finding out how much had gone of life,
> How widely from the others. (CP, 153)

In "Verse de Societe" (1971), the speaker is hesitant whether or not he attends a party he was invited to. Although he eventually decides to attend it, he alienates

himself and remains inactive, which is a sign that he never wants to get intimately or emotionally involved in courteous civilities. Anyhow, he will not convince the reader with the reasons he gives for that submission; he states, “Funny, how hard it is to be alone” (CP, 181). One might not find any interpretation to his reluctance other than phobic impulses.

> Straight into nothingness by being filled
> With forks and faces, rather than repaid
> Under a lamp, hearing the noise of wind.
> And looking out to see the moon thinned
> To an air-sharpened blade.
> A life, and yet how sternly it’s stilled. (CP, 181)

The self-alienation and the distance the speaker of Larkin’s poem put between himself and community help him to stay alert or curious as to how others behave. By that distance, he wants to attain full understanding of people—like an omniscient narrator who does not share in the action. He will be able to speculate calmly and objectively over them. In “Reasons for Attendance” (1953), which is one of the best examples of Larkin’s determination to hold himself aloof, he keeps the distance between him and young dancers in a night-club. The latter are shown “shifting intensely, face to flushed face” (CP, 80), but he does not show any interest to go inside. The questions he asks, “Why be out here?” and “why be out there?” do not reveal any hesitancy towards his resolution not to go in. They are raised just to begin internal philosophical controversy on the difference between preoccupation with revelry on one side, and living a hermetic life of art on the other side. He alienates himself from them by claiming that he does not share their happiness in love and sex:

> The trumpet voice, loud and authorititve,
> Draws me a moment to the lighted glass
> To watch the dancers- all under twenty-five-
> Shifting intently, face to flushed face,
> Solemnly on the beat of happiness.
>
> --Or so I fancy, sensing the smoke and sweat,

The wonderful feel of girls. Why be out here?
But then, why be in there? Sex, yes, but what
Is sex? Surely, to think the lion's share
Of happiness is found by couples-- sheer

Inaccuracy as far as I'm concerned.
What calls me is that listed rough-tongued bell
(Art, if you like)… .(80)

The loud voice of the trumpet symbolizes the vulgar life of revelry, which draws him only for 'a moment to the lighted glass/ To watch the dancers,' while the 'bell' is directly referred to by the speaker as related to art. Banerjee (2008) states that the bell represents "a higher note" (437). The speaker clearly admits that he is attracted to art. It seems that this straight confession conceals a hidden conflict inside the speaker between a natural human desire to join social activities and a motive to run away to a world of seclusion and dreams. The resolution to this conflict comes abruptly at the last line of the poem, "If no one has misjudged himself. Or lied" (80). This opinion confirms that he is doubtful, cautious and irresolute in matters of love, interest and preferences so he always finds resort in self-alienation at the end. Covey (1993) sees that " Larkin's speaker moves from the perception that he can't share the dancers' experience to the attempt to make his own mode of alienated experience somehow more valid than theirs" (19).

This doubt is also clear in "Love Songs in Age" (1957), which is about an old woman who accidently finds a few of her old recorded songs, and she begins to contemplate on her feeling toward love. The poem shows us that her expectations of love are unrealistic. Larkin deflates the woman's hopes that she regains her old fancy of immortal love. She discovers that the promises of bliss in love, which she entertained in the past, have never been fulfilled. She also discovers that love is as dull as all other familiar things:

The glare of that much-mentioned brilliance, love,
Broke out, to show
Its bright incipience sailing above,
Still promising to solve, and satisfy,

And set unchangeably in order, So
To pile them back, to cry,
Was hard, without lamely admitting how
It had not done so then, and could not now. (CP, 126)

If the old woman of "Love Song of Age" is deflated in her search for love, the old man in "High Windows" (1957) is also deflated in his search for the truth. And if the speaker in "Reasons for Attendance" (1953) sees that feeling is only a lie, the speaker in "High Windows" also sees that belief is a lie:

… .That'll be the life;
No God any more, or sweating in the dark
About hell and that, or having to hide
What you think of the priest. (CP, 80)

In this poem, he looks for the truth but he ends up with nothing. He accepts to "go down the long slide" (80) like the majority of people, but this will be done in his particular way since he sees things differently. He chooses to accept his destiny whether it takes him to happiness, and he "go[es] down the long slide/ Like free bloody birds" (80) or he slides down to loss. In his analysis of the poem, Banerjee (1988) concludes that "the vision of death becomes more real as the darkness of night lightens and daylight forces him to confront the stark world, and death." (435). Banerjee's conclusion is not applicable to the end of the poem where the speaker chooses to surrender to nature calmly and silently though it leads him to nonentity and alienation:

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. (80)

Larkin is not unaware of his self-alienation, which he accepts out of a sense of superiority. This feeling of superiority almost puts a distance between the speaker of his poem and people the speaker watches. It seems that the speaker, and consequently Larkin, stands aside like an objective observer who sagaciously

watches a scene. Janice Rossen (1989) also sees that Larkin separates himself from those who take part in the scenes of his poems, "though it is an enriching rather than an alienating kind of separation—one which allows him to see these scenes more profoundly" (59). In his Review of Richard Bradford's critical biography of Philip Larkin, Ward (2006) quotes from Bradford his statement, "Larkin's distance from the world went beyond conventional explanations of the writer's self-marginalization: Larkin marginalized himself not from the world but from himself" (623). Ward also cites from Bradford his statement that what distinguishes Larkin is his "sense of self-compartmentalization," (ibid. 624) and that he revealed himself "only partially" (ibid. 624). Ward assures that the speakers in Larkin's poems are "deliberately crafted to be […] elusive, multifaceted, and indeterminate." (ibid, 624) In his analysis of "Whitsun Weddings," Brown, 1980 is astonished that "By bringing the act of attending into the scene," Larkin "has unknowingly committed an obscenity" because "he has brought on stage what by its nature must occur offstage" (90). It seems that Brown will only be convinced if Larkin keeps on his state as an outside observer.

"Deceptions" (1950) is a true story about a Victorian young girl who was drugged and raped in her unconsciousness. In the poem now, she is over 40 years old, and is narrating what happened to her. Robinson (2009) sees that "one source" of the poem's "significance" and "strains" is that "rape and sexual dissatisfaction are both brought together" (277). Because the experience in the poem is terrifying, Larkin could have related it in emotional version showing true or, maybe false empathy, but he resorts to detach himself from the scene and allow three voices to relate the story, i.e., the poem. Surely this technique of distancing himself is a safe way to avoid giving himself up to empathy. It is clear that we are not going to listen directly to the voice of the poet who stays aloof allowing first the raped woman to narrate her sad story telling us what happened to her. The poet here quotes the exact words of the woman, which he read in a book from the nineteenth century and makes them the poem's epigraph.

> "Of course I was drugged, and so heavily I
> did not regain
> consciousness until the next morning. I
> was horrified to

discover that I had been ruined, and for
some days I was inconsolable,
and cried like a child to be killed or sent
back to my aunt." (CP, 32)

The second voice we listen to is somebody contemporary to the woman. Affection and empathy are very clear in his or her words. We cannot judge whether this voice is Larkin's or not. This confusion is deliberate, but the emotion is very clear:

Even so distant, I can taste the grief,
Bitter and sharp with stalks, he made you gulp.
The sun's occasional print, the brisk brief
Worry of wheels along the street outside
Where bridal London bows the other way,
And light, unanswerable and tall and wide,
Forbids the scar to heal, and drives
Shame out of hiding. All the unhurried day,
Your mind lay open like a drawer of knives. (CP, 32)

The third voice seems to be of a modern reader who admits that he fails to show sympathy to the woman although he seems to be having appreciation to her. Even if the third voice represents Larkin's, it seems that he wants to distance himself here from the emotional situation:

Slums, years, have buried you, I would not dare
Console you If I could. What can be said,
Except that suffering is exact, but where
Desire takes charge, readings will grow erratic?
For you would hardly care
That you were less deceived, out on that bed,
Than he was, stumbling up the breathless stair
To burst into fulfillments desolate attic. (CP, 32)

In the previous stanza, the speaker admits, 'I would not dare console you if I could' because he believes that her 'suffering is exact.' In a neutral and objective attitude, he wonders, 'where/ Desire takes charge, readings will grow erratic?' He adds, 'you were less deceived, out on that bed, / Than he was.' This aloofness is also clear in "Aubade" (1977) at which he can hardly find consolation for his fear of death, though Whiteman (2012) in his Review of Larkin's Complete Poems sees that the last stanza "does go on some consolatory way" (329). In the last stanza, the poet seems to turn away from the dark picture presented in the poem, "Work has to be done./ Postmen like doctors go from house to house" (CP,161), but that does not look to lessen the burden of the speaker's existential worry. The speaker's sessions of existential horror obsess his mind, not because

> -- The good not done, the love not given, time
> Torn off unused—nor wretchedly because
> An only life can take so long to climb
> Clear of its wrong beginnings, and may never. (161)

His reasons for aloofness and horror are distinct; he is afraid from the eternal nothingness, and neither religion nor philosophy is competent to solace him:

> … . Religion used to try,
> The vast, moth-eaten musical brocade
> Created to pretend we never die,
> And specious stuff that says No rational being
> Can fear a thing it will not feel. (161)

His real fear springs from his feeling that what is coming to him after death is only eternal emptiness and loss of self-awareness:

> The sure extinction that we travel to
> And shall be lost in always. Not to be here,
> Not to be anywhere,
> And soon; nothing more terrible, nothing more true. (162)

In “Reasons for Attendance” (1953), he excuses himself for not attending the party for he believes that he is different from those attending there, “But not for me, nor I for them; and so/ With happiness. Therefore I stay outside” (80). But still there is some lurking suspicion inside him that he might be at fault in his reactions, so he admits, “both [sides] are satisfied, / If no one has misjudged himself. Or lied” (80). In both “Reasons for Attendance” and “Deceptions,” the poet seems to try to edge himself away from emotional participation. This oscillation between involvement and distancing suggests that the poet is situated between a need for love and a distaste of it, or between a feeling of being protected or exposed.

“Church Going” (1954),one of the most celebrated Larkin’s poems, shows how Larkin alienates himself from the issues of his society. It is about the decreasing worth of the church in the life of people. It is not about any longing for lost belief in religion although it is not disrespectful toward it. The poem also celebrates the poet’s distancing himself from the religious and social ceremonies performed by people in the church. It is clear that his interest in going inside the church is not derived from belief, so he enters only when he is sure that “there’s nothing going on” (CP, 86). The speaker knows that all the things he looks at carelessly are sacred for others but they look meaningless to him. He almost seems to be interested in the building itself rather than its religious worth:

> …matting, seats, and stone,
> And little books; sprawlings of flowers, cut
> For Sunday, brownish now; some brass and stuff
> Up at the holy end; the small neat organ;
> And a tense, musty, unignorable silence,
> Brewed God knows how long. Hatless, I take off
> My cycle-clips in awkward reverence. (86)

At the end of his wandering inside the church, he “Reflect[s] the place was not worth stopping for.” (86) Therefore, we are not so much surprised at the final stanza of the poem when the poet shows the church’s inability to console him, for although it is a place in which he is supposed to find relief, he will find and accept only the ‘compulsions’ of life on him. These compulsions can be the imposed and

inevitable facts of existence such as birth, living and death. The speaker's fear of compulsions that are destined upon him increases his sense of alienation:

> A serious house on serious earth it is,
> In whole blent air all our compulsions meet,
> Are recognized, and robed as destinies. (88)

Russell (2012) argues that "Larkin's touristic speakers often surprise themselves […] with the discovery of the transcendent in their voyeuristic viewings." (96). What is commonplace for people seems alien or even uncanny to him.

In his commentary on "Absences" (1950), Banerjee (2008) states that there is a "sense that remains the most haunting feature of Larkin's verse," that is "a kind of experience that cannot ultimately be understood by practical reason" (393). Accordingly, Larkin is haunted by a nihilistic view that overwhelms all his thoughts of life and the universe. This universe is mainly described in Larkin's poetry as an empty hall. This estranging image of the world is best contemplated in "Absences" where the ambiguity and emptiness of the universe are symbolically described in images of rain and sea, "rain patters on a sea that tilts and sighs" (92). The poem ends with a picture of the waves,

> … tirelessly at play,
> Where there are no ships and no shallows
> Above the sea, the yet more shoreless day,
> Riddled by wind, trails lit-up galleries:
> They shift to giant ribbing, sift away.
> Such attics cleared of me! Such absences! (92)

Here the poet as a human being is not present; In fact, he himself admits his absence at the last line. We can only see the powers of primitive nature represented by the sea that 'tirelessly' plays, and the void 'day/ Riddled by wind.' This absence of the poet, or of man, strikes off all probabilities of logical thinking. It also bears global dimensions, hence alienating nihilism prevails.

To conclude, the abnormal childhood and the intellectual perspective of Philip Larkin as an adult sets up his attitude towards life, this is to cautiously distance himself from social activities and to look at the world through existential spectacles. This research deems the above mentioned distancing and the existential attitude as "self-alienation." It shows how this self-alienation is thematically reflected in his poetry. After all, we can affirm that Larkin's direct, and sometimes rough verses show how truly honest he is with himself, and how brave he is in confronting the hard truths of life.

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*Philip Larkin, Collected Poems, 1988. All quotations from Larkin's poems are from this reference, which is referred to within the text as (CP). All the quoted lines are from short poems. Therefore, we have not referred to the page numbers.

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المستخلص
الإغتراب الذاتي في شعر فيليب لاركن

كان لطفولة فيليب لاركن و مراهقته دورا مهما في تشكيل فهمه للحياة، و رسم علاقته بالناس و الوجود، حيث كان بوعي منه أو بغير وعي ينأى بنفسه عن الآخرين، و قد انطبعت في ذهنه صورة وجودية قاتمة عن العالم . و يرى الباحثان هنا أن هذا النأي بالنفس و هذه الوجودية إنما هما تجسيد لمعنى اغتراب الشاعر الذاتي، و عليه يُظهر البحث كيف يتجسد الإغتراب الذاتي في معاني و أفكار مجموعة من أفضل قصائد فيليب لاركن. و بعد ذاك فإن بعض الصراحة، أو ربما الفظاظة في شعر فيليب لاركن، إنما تدلّان على إخلاصه لذاته، و صدقه مع نفسه، و شجاعته في مواجهة حقائق الوجود.