

STARE AT THE DARK: PHILIP LARKIN, THE NOSTALGIC VOICE  
OF "THE MOVEMENT."

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KARANLIĞA BAKIŞ : PHILIP LARKIN'İN EYLEMİN NOSTALJİK SESİ

Memet Metin BARLIK\*\*

Özet

Philip Larkin doğayı değişimin, sıradışı güçlerin, giderek yok oluşun ve ölümün yaşadığı yer olarak algılar (Hoffpair 263). Şiirleri yaşamın gerçek yönlerini, ancak özellikle karanlık olan tarafını yansıtır. Örneğin: 'Dockery and Son' (Dockery ve Oğlu) başlıklı şiirinde, "hayatın başlangıçta sıkıcı, sonra korku" olduğunu söyler (Thwaite 152). Yalnızlığın verdiği haz ve acı da Larkin'in odaklandığı konulardandır. İçinde yaşanan an zamanın kontrolündedir. Zaman, güzelliği alıp götürülen bir makine gibi tanımlanır; karanlık gölgesiyle genç, mutlu ve güzel olan her şeyin üstünü örter ve er geç soldurur, çürütür ve her dokunduğu yeri yıpratarak olumsuz bir sonuca yollar. Larkin'in şiirinin içeriği, rengi ve duygu ayarını belirlemede geçmişin de önemli bir rolü vardır. Çaresizliğinin dozu ümidi bastırır; aktardığı sahneler kış mevsiminin egemen olduğu bir bakışla kaybedilmiş anları resmeder. Hafızasındaki geçmişe özlemi olumsuz bir tona akort eder. Özyaşamsal dışavurumları olumsuzluk ve yakınma içeren bir tona sahiptir. Larkin, ne içinde bulunduğu anın sağladığı olanakların getireceği muhteşem ortamı, ne de yeni ufuklar beklentisinde olduğu bir gelecek hayal eder. Asıl olanı yeniden yaratma ya da değiştirme çabası da yoktur. O rastlantısal olarak yaşadığı anlık yaşam deneyimlerinden yola çıkar ve geçmişteki olumsuz sahnelere göndermeler yapar; bu sahneler, kaybedilen geçmiş ile sıkıcı ve doyurucu olmayan şimdi arasında gidiş gelişlerdir.

Bu makalede, Philip Larkin'in şiirindeki olumsuz nostalji örneklerle incelenecek, Larkin'in nostaljiye getirdiği olumsuzluğun otobiyografik ve şairin tarzından kaynaklanan nedenler tartışılacaktır.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** yaşam, ölüm, çaresizlik

\* Aynı makalenin bildiri özeti Hacetepe Üniversitesi, Fen Edebiyat Fakültesi, İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı Bölümünde 17-19 Nisan 2007 tarihleri arasında düzenlenen "2<sup>nd</sup>

International IDEA Conference: Studies in English" konulu konferansta yayımlanmıştır.

\*\* Yüzüncü Yıl Üniversitesi, Fen Edebiyat Fakültesi, İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı Bölümü, Van.

### Abstract

*Philip Larkin interprets nature as a realm of change, obscure forces, decay, and death (Hoffpair 263). His poems reflect the truth of life, but mostly the darker side; as he announces in "Dockery and Son" "Life is first boredom, then fear" (Thwaite 152). Larkin also focuses on loneliness with its pleasures as well as its pain (Bedient 39). Time is defined as a beauty-consuming-machine spreading its dark shadow over everything young, beautiful, and happy, and sooner or later, fades, rots, or causes the decay wherever it touches. The past has an important role in the content, color and emotional tuning of Larkin's poetry. He has less hope, deeper desperation and depicts scenes which recall the lost time in the nostalgic past with a mind of winter. His nostalgic memory proves to have a negative accord. His autobiographical reflections create an aura seized by physical and mental tiredness and complain. However, the wishful thinking about the opportunities of the present, anticipating a golden future, and looking forward to the new horizons, seem not within Larkin's preoccupations. Nor does he deals with the re-creation of the original scene. Through contingently lived spontaneous experiences, Larkin recalls negative nostalgic flashbacks that could be defined as the interplay between his lost past and boring unsatisfactory present.*

*In this article, I will examine the negative nostalgic tone in Philip Larkin's poetry and discuss the autobiographical reasons of his negative nostalgia.*

**Key words:** *life, death, being desperate*

### A 'burnt-out childhood'

Philip Arthur Larkin was born in 1922 in Coventry, Warwickshire. His real-life experiences, temper and physical features seem to have a considerable impact on the way he observes his inner and the outer world. For him life has got two important phases; "...first boredom, then fear," and time is an uncontrollable phenomenon; "Whether or not we use it, it goes," which finally brings "...the only end of age." ('Dockery and Son' Thwaite 152). Larkin is exact and clear when defines his childhood as "a forgotten boredom." ('Coming' Thwaite 33) Again in 'On Being Twenty-six' the poet recalls his "burnt-out childhood," and confesses that he was "...misled," and that "...made the deepest wound of all on (his) mind." (ibid 24-25) The negative aura he lived at home created unrecoverable effects on his nostalgic past and point of view: "There was very little outspoken anger," Andrew Motion,

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Larkin's friend and biographer reports from Larkin's own words, "but the sense that it was always just about to begin – an atmosphere of clenched irritation which curdled the whole experience of childhood." (Motion 9) Motion, in *A Writer's Life* (1994) uncovers some other reasons for his insulation: "Even as a very small child," he writes, "Larkin's eyesight was weak;" he was physically "...ungainly; and by the age of four he had started to stammer badly" which "...went on up to the age of thirty-five or so." (ibid)

In 1930, Larkin was sent to King Henry VIII Grammar School in Coventry, staying until 1940 when he was eighteen. In his school years he was a child with a character of "shy, strongly opinionated," but was "...also proud, confident, and contemptuous of those set in authority over him." (15) "When he entered the senior school, his teacher knew not to believe that the shyness he showed in class was the sum of his whole personality." (17) As his self-confidence grew, he made friends and "...turned to weightier matters; discovered D. H. Lawrence," and "...began to listen to jazz;" (21) and soon "the lyrics as well as the music of jazz attracted" him. (22)

His first prose called 'Getting up in the Morning' was accepted for the *Coventrian*, the school magazine, shortly before leaving Form III. (ibid) By the end of 1937, when he was fifteen, his self reliance took control of his shyness and he "...joined the school debating society and play-reading group; ...started to take part (backstage) in the annual school play; and had begun writing regular letters to the school magazine about anything that amused or irritated him. (27) Making best use of his father's library, Larkin was an avid reader of Keats, Hardy, Auden, Husman, Eliot, Christina Rossetti and Aldous Huxley until he graduated. In 1940 he was accepted by St John's College, Oxford, to read English where he arrived with a considerable number of unpublished poems and a stack of jazz records. Jazz along with poetry was the great passion of his life. (Leggett 258) Now, Larkin was "...on his way to be exceptional," and finally "the shy stammerer, veering between mischief and solitude, had discovered his intellect." (Motion 32) But "until he arrived there, life had been largely 'boredom'; now 'boredom' was shadowed by 'fear.'" (36)

On leaving Oxford, he wanted to write, but felt that he should get a job. He attempted, twice, to enter the civil service, but was exempted on medical grounds. Instead he secured a job as Librarian of the Wellington urban district council in Shropshire. His 'very ordinary' adult life was spent toiling dully in

far-flung, unglamorous towns – where, as he says in 'Here,' "only salesman and relations come." (136) His first job was followed by a stint as Assistant Librarian at the University College of Leicester, then Sub-Librarian at Queens University in Belfast and finally he became head of the Brynmore Jones Library at the University of Hull.

His adult life was an almost perpetual entanglement with women whom he could neither marry nor easily break away from. (Epstein 43) He led a simple, stoical, and "a much more dramatic and intense life, which was ...performed on an inner stage rather than before the wide world." (Motionix) He died in 1985 at the age of sixty-three, and "...left a permanent impress, creating a distinctive mood – the Larkinesque - and a compact world; that world is dark-gray if a color be wanted." (Epstein 39)

### Larkin's Negative Nostalgia

With poems of mature voice, the publication of *The Less Deceived* (1955) which was the signal for the 'Movement' to begin, English poetry tended to turn its back on Modernism. (Lucie-Smith 21) And Larkin's appearance in *New Lines* (1957) which specifically reacted against Modernism and excess in favour of traditional comeliness and clarity caused him to be regarded as leader of the 'Movement,' which defined a poetic tendency than a group of writers (Blamires 1986. 240). Melancholy and yearning for the past is one of the dominant moods of the Movement's tradition (Ward 6-17) and Larkin upholds this tone so much that he represents, what I will define here, the nostalgic voice of the 'Movement.' Representing the characteristic voice of a whole generation, (Lucie-Smith 121) and with his naturally assured craftsman and deep observation, Philip Larkin takes poetry away from the academics and brings it within the grasp of the intelligent ordinary reader who looks to poetry of insight, delight, and even consolation. (Epstain 40-41) He can move between low, even obscene colloquialism to high poetic utterance and back in the compass of a single poem. (Bergonzi 356) He tries to recapture the attention of the typical representative of the British middle class, not concerning with urbanity or intellectualism. (Tierce 95) While sharing many norms with the Movement poets, Larkin has a distinct way of taking hold of the outer world, and a special deal of communicating with his readers. He writes with "Words as plain as hen-birds' wings" because they "Do not lie," and "Do not over-

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broider things..." 'Modesties' (26) With unflattering truism and honesty, he addresses to a community of moderate readers; reflecting on his dislike of all youthful pursuits, and yearnings of a boring, monotonous life. "The load of snow, soiled and old, stays on the roof in poem after poem and, rubbing a clear space at the window, Larkin is there to mourn once again a world without generative fire." (Bedient 69)

Themes composed with "negative order of ideas," (Bedient 69) reflect the 'dark-gray' color, as Joseph Epstein defines, and turn his nostalgic yearnings into 'negative' tone. Nostalgia is defined as "a preference; general liking, positive attitude, or favorable affect toward objects people, places, or things that were more common popular, fashionable, or widely circulated when one was younger in early adulthood, in adolescence, in childhood, or even before birth. (Holbrook and Schindler (1991) 330). In other words, 'nostalgia' is the tendency to look back upon past events with a certain yearning, as if the past was somehow preferable to the present. Whereas, the ambience of Larkin's poetry implies quite an opposite meaning; focusing on the scenes of nostalgic memory of the poet, one is obliged to add 'negative' to define Larkin's nostalgic recollections.

His poems concentrate on human beings' worst fears; such as the universal fear of oblivion, suffering and loneliness, (Epstein 39) and his readers easily apprehend his interpretation of the nature as a realm of change, obscure forces, decay, and death. (Hoffpair 263) The darker side of life is where he mostly holds his mirror and with a dim light on, he torches on the condition of mankind; opening parenthesis for parental relationships, friendship, childhood, adulthood, home, time, aging, and death. He prefers to "make poetry out of negative feelings." (Bergonzi 359) His pessimist, and negative approach is audible from the titles of some of his poems: 'Going,' 'An April Sunday Brings the Snow,' 'Neurotics,' 'I am Washed Upon a Rock,' 'To Failure,' 'Deceptions,' 'No Road,' 'Wires,' 'Absences,' 'Negative Indicative,' 'Church Going'... Of course, he has many other poems with a positive title but negative content.

Larkin gets stuck into the dullest corners of life, and picks up ordinary, everyday stuff, and reflects on them. (Thwaite 26) Empathizing with the grazing race-horses which "...stand anonymous;" the persona is not interested in their memories of fame, and good old days, but curious about the days

which are "summer by summer all stole(n) away," and "The starting-gates, the crowds and cries." stand faded and unreachably far. ('At Grass' 29) In 'At Grass' the attention is more on the lonely and alienated conditions of the old race-horses at the very moment they are in then on their successful days in the past. The focus is on the scenes where one cannot feel relaxed or released but surrounded and deprived. It is a preoccupation with the pathos and inevitability of aging, giving messages of the feeling of being pushed aside by flourishing of younger generations. If life is evaluated as one day, the people around are already in the afternoon and the dark evening is approaching, or if life is to be taken as a year, then the persona is already in the fall; and the inevitable winter is approaching.

With "...a mind of winter," (Bedient 69) and ordinary persona, Larkin draws the readers' attention to the quest of meaning in a meaningless world; meaningless because time – the beauty-consuming-machine - is able to spread its dark shadow over everything young, beautiful, and happy. With its mischievous intentions, time is implanted into the mind of Larkinesque persona, and lets them not to have hopes and be "...too eager for the future...," and "Pick up bad habits of expectancy." Because, "Something is always approaching; every day:" A ship is seeking us but it is not the Noah's Ship to save from The Flood, it is:

..., a black –  
Sailed unfamiliar, towing at her back  
A huge and birdless silence. In her wake  
No waters breed or break. 'Next Please' (Thwaite 52)

There is no way of escaping from time; we live in "...a world eaten through at the root by time..." (Bedient 73) and we human beings are the obligatory passengers of it; days are short periods "...where we live. / They come, they wake us / Time and time over. / They are to be happy in:" "Where can we live but days?" he asks; and the question is answered by two authorities; one is "the doctor" whose probable answer is 'death,' and the second is "the priest" whose answer is not different. ('Days' Thwaite 67) In 'To Failure' written in 1949, the persona addressing to a friend inserts that he is "aware the days pass quicker than before, / Smell staler too. And once they fall behind / They look like ruin..." (28) For Larkin, the days lack happiness and sharing; and so they pass quickly and are gone, and nothing is worth recalling.

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Time is a phenomena of "...perpetual slow leak, and the years" are "precious air always escaping him. His twenties, his thirties, his forties, his fifties, his sixties, all" seem to him "to have been vasted..." (Epstein 46) Life is seen as a "slow dying" period. ('Nothing to be Said' Thwaite 138) But, one may think, if the present does not contain sources of happiness, a possible alternative, however imaginary might be to turn back to the past where happiness is. For Larkin, that alternative of nostalgia is dark and negative; no source of the light of freedom, tranquility and happiness can be traced within the past.

In 'The Life with a Hole in it' Larkin's analysis of 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 having-to, fear, faces.  
Days shift down it constantly. Years. (202)

Here, life is defined as a three dimensional "struggle"; of 'what we have, what we can change, and what we cannot touch. But the speed or power of that struggle hasn't control over the time; the "...unbeatable slow machine," which 'shifts down' our 'days and years' and takes us to the inevitable end is doing what it has to do.

Negative nostalgia is an aspect of the poetic persona that Larkin developed for his yearnings on time, aging, and vainly lost childhood and youth. In 'On Being Twenty-six', for instance, he projects his nostalgic look on the lost youth:

'On Being Twenty-six'  
I feared these present years,  
The middle-twenties,  
When deftness disappears,  
And each event is  
Freighted with a source-encrusting doubt,  
And turned to drought.

...

And now the slag  
Of burnt-out childhood proves that I was right...  
Quickly consumed in me,  
As I foresaw  
Talent, facility –  
These things withdraw ... (24-25)

Nostalgia, tuned negatively seems like a mind-filter almost always present in the poet's looks and observations. The negative tone is promptly audible from the first line; "I feared these present years, / the middle-twenties..." he is young but, he is not pleased or happy or does not feel free; on the contrary, his youth adds 'fear' to 'boredom' of his childhood. While a normal reflection of nostalgia would convey thoughts and feelings of the advantages and freedom that comes with self-reliance and self-confidence of youth. The poet prefers to picture the darker side of the medal which contains skepticism and loss.

Larkin's nostalgia is a lost one, "Where has it gone, the lifetime?" he asks, and answers back; "...What is left is drear. / Unchilded and unwifed, I'm / Able to view that clear: / So final. And so near." 'The View' 195) The reader sometimes hears a voice of confessional feelings and thoughts reflected in the best realistic tone. In 'Annus Mirabilis' he stands outside the window watching "the dancers – all under twenty five – who maul to and fro" inside, and commands:

Sexual intercourse began  
In nineteen sixty three  
(Which was rather late for me) -  
...  
So life was never better than  
In nineteen sixty three  
(Though just too late for me) (167)

As it is felt nullity and futility draws more attention than happiness and sharing. He stands outside and watches, and comments on the scenes; to what extend do they concern him? Neither the place where he stands, nor the characters and spots he looks at are satisfactory. Then the reader hears complaints, mourning and requiems for the lost years: "When I was a child..." he says "...I thought, / Casually, that solitude" was "Something everybody



had." ('Best Society' 56) The early years of his life started with "...a nailed-up childhood," and passed by "...chronic solitude." ('Marriages' 63) The days of happiness are lost within the dimension 'he could not change.'

"Nullity is simply taken for granted" (C. Bedient 71). The larkinesque persona appears in the scenes where the imagination and memory are used to show the nihilistic recollections; vainly lost chances which have not yet been regained or lived. His mother's "...worried summer-look is lost" and though, "...the summer days appear / emblems of perfect happiness," he "can't confront" because he "...must await" for "...an autumn more appropriate." ('Mother, Summer, I' 68) His unfulfilled hopes, dreams never lived out, and good times when one can never experience again with the same level of taste and density of emotions are shared with the readers. His lost nostalgia is figured as an unreachable, frozen utopia in 'The Trees.' (166) And in 'Whatever Happened' the past is found to be "Kodak-distant:"

At once whatever happened starts receding.

...

Yes, gone, thank God! Remembering each detail

We toss for half the night, but find next day

All is Kodak-distant. Easily, then (though pale)... (74)

Whatever happened is carved within his nostalgic memory; alive and luminous, which still causes sleepless nights; he is glad and thankful though, that the past traumas are gone, and seem far away on the 'next day.' The graphic line is downward towards isolation, alienation, loneliness, and oblivion. When the present lacks love, hopes fade away life becomes the very source of boredom and fear. His past is as much with him as his present as focused on in the following poem:

'The Horns of the Morning'

...

Here, Where no love is,

All that was hopeless

And kept me from sleeping

Is frail and unsure;

For never so brilliant,

Neither so silent

Nor so unearthly, has

Earth grown before. (275)

'Love' is depicted as the key word for a happy life; but the progress is negative; day by day the world is getting worse.

The unease of his autobiographical past and the lack of love of the present make the poet to take a sorrowful and snowbound tone while explaining his confessional complaints to a close friend: "No," he says, "I have never found / The place where I could say / *This is my proper ground, / Here I shall stay...*" Neither has he met someone, a "...special one / Who has an instant claim / On everything I own / Down to my name." ('Places, Loved Ones' 99) With these lines Larkin explicitly pictures an alienated person. In this poem there is also a complain about the short lifetime: "... Where has it gone, the lifetime?" and he has had nothing that he is pleased, he says /...Search me. What's left is drear. / Unchilded and unwifed, I'm / Able to view that clear: / So final. And so near." (ibid)

In 'Neurotics' again, he notes about the loss of interest and attention that comes with aging: "... So year by year your tense unfinished faces / Sink further from the light. No one pretends / To want to help you now. For interest passes / Always towards the young and more insistent." (21) And that makes him believe that aging means "adder-faced singularity," (63) and as for the memories; they are "... Like fallen apples, they will lose / Their sweetness at the bruise, / And then decay." (282) because, "... All beauty under the sun - / Still end in loss:"

He is always very near to 'The End' and the decay is not only physical but mental as well; in 'The View' for instance, he confesses that he "...spent" his "second quarter-century / Losing what" he "...had learnt at university." (195) Yearning for his innocent and naive studentship years, he warns that everything is subjected to change, "fading and decay." ('The Winter Palace' 211)

The present is boring as much as the past is not worth remembering. In 'Vers de Société' (181) he brings up the hypocrisy and selfishness in Modern society and gives clues about the sources of his uneasiness:

'Vers de Société'

...

All solitude is selfish. No one now  
Believes the hermit with his gown and dish  
Talking to God (who's gone too); the big wish

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Is to have people nice to you, which means  
Doing it back somehow.  
Virtue is social. Are, then, these routines  
Playing at goodness, like going to church?  
Something that bores us, something we don't do well  
Only the young can be alone freely.  
The time is shorter now for company,  
And sitting by a lamp more often brings  
Not peace but other things. ... (181)

In the first lines of the poem, Larkin inserts that everybody plays the role that they need to. They are not sincere and frank and from the colorful masks that are worn people are difficult to be understood. Religion and places of worshipping are misused by the people who are 'playing at goodness.' And in the last stanza, he complains about having no chance of being alone and asserts that only 'the young can be alone freely.'

In Larkin's popular poem 'Church-going' the narrator finds himself visiting an empty church whose dogmas seem to be fading. Evoking nostalgia over the loss of a church that is still found in the modern world, Larkin speaks of the universal need for spiritual dimension of life. The change he has explored comprises the history, both symbolizing the conspicuous loss of root values, as well as the erosion of spiritual norms that the Modern society spoils unconsciously. He portrays the decay by making the reader to recognize that there is a passing or a fading away of memory representing the history. He implies that the sacred relics of the past have not yet lost their mysterious and ecclesiastical appeal, and that they retain the value of the union of the important stages of human life, birth, youth, and death.

### **Conclusion**

From his childhood onwards, the shadow of the past darkens the poet's light of the present. Among the provocative agents, the unstoppable time stands as one of the major trouble-maker phenomenon whose erosion and decay affects wherever it touches. This fast and uncontrollable agent has created an older, sadder, and wiser persona in Larkin's poetry. And it is in this dim and negative perspective that the poet looks the outer world and the

'Other.' He looks at the outside world from an "empirical, skeptical, debunking," and nostalgic mind filter (Ingelbien 262). When denoting the outer world, he is hardly objective, but the "vacillate between self-disclosure and self-concealment" (Fletcher 139). The outcoming of self-revelation or self-definition stands tasteless without the negative nostalgia. Equating his biographical realities with the outside world, Larkin draws a line between himself and the contemporary popular culture-addict society.

From the general to the particular, Larkin concentrates on the negative human condition; such as suffering, loneliness, ageing, and death. Death, commanded by time, is the most powerful consumer of beauty and happiness of both human being and the world we live in. The poet's negative nostalgia creates the idea that all historical and traditional values shrivel and disappear in course of time. So, meaning or meaninglessness, value and devaluing, respect or futility depend on the time and circumstances. Larkin's search is not for the positive or happy scene. "In an imaginary world made up of ships, shores and high attic windows, he watches the power of individual choice being challenged by death and fortified by comedy." (Motion 35)

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