

## THE ART OF AN ANTI-ROMANTIC AND AN ANTI-MODERNIST: LARKIN ABOUT MODERN REALITY\*

Arş. Gör. Leman DEMİRBAŞ  
Gazi Üniversitesi Eğitim Bilimleri Enstitüsü  
[lemanksp@gmail.com](mailto:lemanksp@gmail.com)  
ORCID ID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9254-6622>

### Abstract

In the early 1950s a group of young English poets formed a literary circle called The Movement, as a correspondent to Angry Young Man in theatre. Philip Larkin is a perfect representative of the Movement and post-war generation. He interpreted modern reality from his own perspective with a realistic, simple, clear, colloquial style that discarded both Romanticism and Modernism. He was the follower of a clearly English line, with provincialism in theme, traditionalism in form, blunt representations of modern reality, refusal of idealization of the self or nature, and a kind of simplicity, and accessibility. Thus in this paper Larkin's anti-romantic and anti-modernist style of poetry will be discussed with his involvement of the Movement, and analyzed through several of his poems.

**Keywords:** Larkin, the Movement, poetry, anti-romantic, anti-modernist.

## BİR ANTI-ROMANTİK VE ANTI-MODERNİSTİN SANATI: LARKIN'IN MODERN GERÇEKLİK ÜZERİNE DÜŞÜNCELERİ

### Öz

1950'lerin başında bir grup genç İngiliz şair, tiyatrodaki Angry Young Man akımının şiirdeki yansıması olarak The Movement adlı edebi bir çevre oluşturdular. Philip Larkin, hem The Movement akımının hem de savaş sonrası İngiliz şiir geleneğinin mükemmel bir temsilcisidir. Modern gerçekliği kendi bakış açısıyla hem Romantizmi hem de Modernizmi yadsıyarak gerçekçi, basit, açık, sözlü ifadelili bir tarzla yorumladı. Biçimindeki geneleksellik, içeriğindeki yerellik, modern gerçekliği çarpıcı ve açık ifade etmesi, benliğin ya da doğanın idealleştirilmesini reddetmesi ve bir tür basitlik arayışında olması ve şiirin herkes tarafından erişilebilir olması açısından Larkin açıkça İngiliz geleneğinin takipçisidir. Dolayısıyla, bu çalışmada Larkin'in anti-romantik ve anti-modernist şiir tarzı The Movement akımının etkisi üzerinden tartışılacak ve birkaç şiir üzerinden Larkin'in şiir anlayışı incelenecektir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Larkin, the Movement akımı, şiir, anti-Romantik, anti-modernist.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

"Poetry has lost its old audience," Larkin wrote in 1957, and "[t]his has been caused by the consequences of a cunning merger between poet, literary critic and academic critic (three classes now notoriously indistinguishable)" (cited in Motion 1982: 11). In fact, he was referring to and reacting against T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. But still, Larkin does not seem to be a friend of academics either, which makes it difficult to write criticism on him.

In the early 1950s a group of young English poets formed a literary circle called The Movement, as a correspondent to Angry Young Man in theatre. In 1954 Mr. Scott, editor of the magazine *Spectator* wrote an article "In the Movement" and defined "a new post-war spirit in literature," (Booth 2005: 122) which later became the famous manifesto of the group. He defined the group "The Movement" in terms of "a lost idealism" and "an unsettled postwar England": "The Movement, as well as being anti-phoney, is anti-wet; sceptical, robust, ironic, prepared to be as comfortable as possible in a wicked, commercial, threatened world which doesn't look, anyway, as if it's going to be changed much by a couple of handfuls of young English writers' (Scott 1954, cited in Regan 2007: 211). Thus, in this paper Larkin's anti-romantic and anti-modernist style of poetry will be discussed with his involvement of the Movement, and analyzed through his poems, "Church Going," "The Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album," and "Going Going."

## 2. DISCUSSION

According to Stephen Regan, The Movement was born mainly as "a reaction against the inflated romanticism of the 1940s, a victory of common sense and clarity over obscurity and mystification, of verbal restraint over stylistic excess" (2003: 209). Their work deliberately contrasted not only with the high emotion and romantic idealization, like represented at the time by Dylan Thomas but also with the Modernist tradition of T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, especially for their elitism and obscurantism. The Movement poets wanted to bring poetry down to earth, to the everyday life, with a realist and empiricist perspective. As Professor Batum Menteşe (2009) argues, they were "against Modernism that is against experimentalism, against, obscurantism, formal complexity, the avant-garde, the bohemian, the notion of a cultural apocalypse" (p.119). Therefore, they were both anti-Romantic and anti-Modernist in their art.

Even though they did not exist as a homogeneous literary group, they had a cultural influence. Each poet had his own unique style, and character of poetry. The poets of the Movement also produced two anthologies, *Poets of the 1950s* (1955) and *New Lines* (1956) (Carter and McRae 2001: 388) The group consists of several young poets, Philip Larkin, Kingsley Amis, Donald Davie, D.J. Enright, John Wain, Elizabeth Jennings, Thom Gunn, and Robert Conquest, and Philip Larkin immediately emerged as the most notable. As Morrison argues in his book *The Movement, English Poetry and Fiction of the 1950s*, the poet of the Movement was "a provincial, lower-middle class, scholarship-winning Oxbridge-educated university lecturer" (cited in Menteşe 2009: 120). Thus, the poets of the Movement had a kind of English provincialism, they were English in character and in subject-matter.

Philip Larkin was the typical Movement poet. He was a middle-class, Oxford graduate, and a lifelong librarian as profession. He always tried to 'seem' like an ordinary person. He undertook to present an ironic, self-critical persona that saw his life as boring, dull and even a failure (Motion 1982: 20-25). As far as it is understood from his statements on different occasions, he was a melancholic, self-pitying man who had a "limited" capacity for joy (Lerner 1997: 2-5) or perhaps he wanted to seem like that: this could be the public persona he drew for himself (Lerner 1997: 34-40). Yet he had an interest and pride in the ordinary in that post-war culture. He was actually happy to be ordinary. As Lerner remarks he never went abroad, never married, preferred not to appear in public, and led a private life. In an interview at *Times*, he called himself as "simple ordinary man in an unromantic world," which most clearly reflects his idea of the poet as well as of modern reality (Motion 1982: 22). But his career as a poet was not that modest. His first collection of poetry, *The*

*North Ship* was published in 1945. He turned to prose and published two novels successively. After *Whitsun Weddings* he was already a famous and honored poet with many awards: the Queens' Gold Medal for Poetry in 1965, and honorary doctorates from University of Belfast, Leicester, Warwick, Sussex and Oxford

Yet, the poetry of Philip Larkin is against the Romantic tradition in several aspects. Though he uses some elements associated with Romantic poets, his attitude is very different. At this point it will be useful to remember Wordsworth's definition of poetry as he was one of the cornerstones of Romanticism. Wordsworth says in the "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads* (2001) that poetry is the "the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge", and that it is "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings". Therefore, in a Romantic poem, it is the person of the poet who speaks, as well as his deep emotions and fears. Then the subjective correlative of the poem transforms into a deep philosophizing over the soul and the world that is full of problems and anguish. Yet, the poet remains positive and hopeful. His emotions are expressed in such an aesthetic way that the reader is moved by these beautiful descriptions and the musical quality of the poem. As for the poet, Wordsworth asks:

What is a Poet? to whom does he address himself? and what language is to be expected from him?—He is a man speaking to men: a man, it is true, endowed with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind ("Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*," 2001: 651).

Thus, poet is supposed to be a common man among his people, like his audience, which is the key term for Larkin as well. But still he is the one with "a more comprehensive soul." He is the sage that knows and contemplates on the truths of this great universe. Nature, which is usually the subject matter for the Romantic poet, is beautiful, peaceful, comforting, and has a sacred-like quality. It bears a godly spirituality, a metaphysical power and benevolence, so that the poet is united with nature.

Larkin's poetry is also personal but he does not assert the importance of his own emotions or experiences, and never highlights a sage-like wisdom at the speaker. The speaker in his poems is usually "I", but it is not always Larkin, the poet. Sometimes he uses dramatic persona as well. His "I" in the poems does not have a sentimental stand but he is more like an observer, a reporter. Therefore, he is subjective like Romantic poets but his subjectivism is not based on the emphasis of subjectivity, or emotionalism. He wants to be an "ordinary man," not a sage. Nature may be his focal point in some poems like in "Going Going" but he does not attribute a spiritual, godly power to it like Wordsworth does. Larkin is realistic, unsentimental and ironic in his poetic expression. He writes about usual, everyday life, and the familiar objects in a modern world. Yet, he sometimes achieves to be optimistic in his poetry, even at times when he explores the theme of death with a Hardy-like attitude, who was an inspiration to Larkin. He is a poet with a "capacity to create a recognizable and democratic vision of contemporary society" (Morton 1987: 20).

On the other hand, Eliot's complexity and elitism as well as Pound's concern to "Make It New" did not appeal to Larkin and his fellow Movement friends who saw themselves as the follower of a clearly English line, with provincialism in theme, traditionalism in form, blunt representations of modern reality, refusal of idealization of the self or nature, and a kind of simplicity, and accessibility. In opposition to Eliot's definition of poetry in "Tradition and The Individual Talent" (2001: 1093) as "poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality", Larkin remarks in *Required Writings* (1984:197) that "poetry is an affair of sanity, of seeing things as they are, to recreate the familiar, eternalizing the poet's own perception in unique and original verbal form". Furthermore, in his preface to *All What Jazz* (1985), Larkin clearly declares his dislike of Modernism on several grounds:

And yet again, there was something about the books I was reading that seemed oddly familiar. This *development*, this *progress*, this *new language* that was more *difficult*, the more *complex*, that required you to *work hard appreciating it*, that you *couldn't expect to understand first to go*, that needed *technical and professional knowledge* to evaluate it *at all levels*, this *revolutionary explosion* that *spoke for our time* while at the same time being *traditional* in the *fullest*, the *deepest*.... Of course! This was the language of criticism of modern painting, modern poetry, modern music. *Of course!* (292).

To Larkin, the term modern bears “a quality of irresponsibility peculiar to this century” and he is disturbed with this peculiarity because it has weakened the tension between the artist and the reader, and has led the artist to become “over-concerned with his material” (Larkin 1985: 293). The “modernist” culture is so much distressed with the idea of mystification and outrage that sometimes it produced very ridiculous and meaningless objects but the audience is always told not to trust himself to misjudge arts. Larkin mocks elitism of modernism: “Don’t trust your eyes, or ears or understanding. [...] Don’t believe them. You’ve got to work at this: after all, you don’t expect to understand anything as important as art straight off, do you?” Therefore, good poetry for Larkin needs not only to restore this deteriorated unity between the poet and the reader, but also to suppress the distress of the author to create obscure materials and to bring him down on to earth, among his fellow citizens. In other words, Larkin tactfully removes the poet from his elevated seat and puts him on the street, as an ordinary man, even as a next-door neighbor. His poetry is in a way “demystification, even, a vulgarization of poetry and poets” as Neil Covey notes (1993: 12). However, in his later poetry collections like *High Windows* (1974) his poetry tend more to complexity, for which he is criticized.

It is also important to remember Yeats and Hardy to fully grasp Larkin’s idea of poetry. Even though he was anti-Romantic, he accepts the influence of Yeats especially on his early poetry. In the preface to a new edition of *The North Ship* (1973), Larkin acknowledged Yeats’s influence until 1946, when he rediscovered Hardy by reading “Thoughts of Phena At News of Her Death.” since “the Celtic fever abated” (Regan 2007: 151). Larkin says “I looked to Hardy rather than Yeats as my ideal, and eventually a more rational approach, less hysterical, and emphatic, asserted itself” (Motion, 1982: 35). Yeats was a Romantic who was very much interested in symbolism in poetry. Hardy, on the other hand, was more realistic, more direct and more engaged with the modern concerns for Larkin. However, as Andrew Motion writes his poetry “is certainly not Yeats’s heroic struggle to rise above time, or “Hardy’s shoulder-shrugging acceptance of fate,” but his poems reflect “a need of control and manipulate life” and “the necessity of choice” (1982: 70).

### 2.1 Church Going

In his poem “Church Going”, which is the most famous poem of the *Less Deceived* (1955) the act of going to church is told from the perspective of the ordinary modern man. The speaker goes into a church building once he is “sure there is nothing going on.” Inside the building, he is an enthusiastic observer: he sees the matting on the floor, the seats, and a number of Bibles, organ etc. These objects of English provincialism are far from any kind of religious or cultural idealization, instead they are represented as some “stuff.” The poem reads as a monologue in which the speaker frankly appears as an agnostic. The speaker is “I” in the poem. It is the persona of an ordinary, clumsy man who sneaks into the church and questions “what will remain when disbelief has gone.” But according to Lerner, the speaker can also be Larkin himself. In an interview, Larkin told that he was fond of visiting churches (even though he was an atheist) and that he often visited churches by bicycle when he was in Belfast as a librarian. Irish money that the speaker gives in the poem may refer to another autobiographic detail, as well. Therefore, while some critics believe that the speaker is certainly Larkin, others argue it is the stereotypical persona of the modern man. But still Larkin’s persona in the poem is not the Romantic sage that knows all but an ordinary man who contemplates on the truth of this great universe:

Yet stop I did: in fact I often do,  
 And always end much at a loss like this,  
 Wondering what to look for; wondering, too,  
 When churches will fall completely out of use  
 What we shall turn them into

He is a disbeliever, questioning the end of church once the religion is gone, and tries to find an answer from his inner self. At first he refuses to answer, yet he cannot stop thinking. He already degraded church to a simple building, seeing it like a museum or a historical remnant from ancient times, without any spiritual meaning attached. His perspective to religion and church is quite secular. Therefore, his questions are far from emotionalism or nostalgia but products of philosophical thinking. He concludes with an assumption: perhaps when all religion is gone and churches are slowly forgotten, it is the sole activity or the tradition of church going that may remain.

I wonder who  
 Will be the last, the very last, to seek  
 This place for what it was; one of the crew  
 That tap and jot and know what rood-lofts were?

On the other hand, the setting is urban in the poem, as well as the problem of religion. It is the post-war period when people question their belief of God. The previous Modernists revealed the deep void of the world once God is dead, but Larkin in the poem is not that terrified, perplexed, or angry. He takes this modern idea for granted, and even sees some beauty in the old remnants which does not detain him from mocking. So the reader is not presented with ugly images, and unpleasantness but a realist view of the environment. Though the speaker cannot find any meaning at the church beyond its physical and imagery significance, it "pleases" him and he creates a somehow sympathetic view of it, which is far from disturbing Modernist imagery. Larkin sees things as they are and recreates what is familiar. More importantly, he avoids any kind of complexity, intertextuality, parody or obscurantism of Modernists like Eliot, and creates a direct communication with the reader. Larkin uses the colloquial words like "stuff," "my cycle-clips", "ruin-bibber", "Christmas-addict", "weedy pavement" through which he destroys Modernist elitism and pulls the poet on the streets.

## 2.2 Going and Going

"Going and Going" is one of the most acknowledged poems of Larkin. It was first appeared in 1972 as part of a report commissioned by the British Department of the Environment. Larkin expresses his environmental concerns for the beauties of provincial England in this poem, emphasizing beauty as well as vulnerability of natural world.

The narrative voice is subjective; it is possibly Larkin himself, who experiences overwhelming concerns as he observes a gradual destruction of nature. Previously, the speaker was thinking that nature would preserve in England, fields, farms, and the trees would continue, and that it would always be possible to go to the countryside for some relaxation by car. Similarly, he had thought that the sea would always be clean even if people went on throwing their garbage. But the reality is the opposite of this ideal picture. Instead of nature, he finds more houses are being built, caravan sites are occupied, more places are reserved for big business buildings, and even the sea is not clean enough for a summer holiday. He criticizes the greed of industrialism that destroys life-giving nature for the sake of material wealth, and capitalism that ignites it, so that even kids scream for more toys.

I thought it would last my time -  
 The sense that, beyond the town,  
 There would always be fields and farms,  
 Where the village louts could climb

Such trees as were not cut down;  
I knew there'd be false alarms

Speaker reminds us the nature in the first two stanzas, which could be closest attempt of Larkin toward a Wordsworthian sense of belonging to nature. However, he is anti-Romantic in this sense as he never ascribes spiritual meaning to nature, or the role of the wise sage to himself, or a kind of superior being that leads his readers to a better world. He is merely an ordinary citizen who shares his concerns for the society he is living in. His use of colloquial language is always a reminder of this fact throughout the poem.

Later, Larkin spreads the imagery of city life with cars, cafes, buildings, business life and dirt. The readers are thrown into dark mimetic descriptions of the environment. The city life is unpleasant since there is no room for nature now but for fast-spreading buildings. In this sense, following stanza can be considered as closely associated with Eliot's descriptions of the environment in "Preludes" (1920) for instance. But in the end, Larkin remains anti-Modernist, and draws an optimistic, hopeful picture for the future.

[...] The crowd  
Is young in the M1 cafe;  
Their kids are screaming for more -  
More houses, more parking allowed,  
More caravan sites, more pay.

Also, the formal aspects of the poem reflect Larkin's colloquialism and clarity, in opposition to obscurantism he always criticizes. The rhyme and meter is traditional again, not distorted. With a musical quality that is achieved through repetition of certain sounds like "s" it moves the reader. In this way, Larkin achieves to create an honest connection with the reader, representing the destroyed beauty of nature and warning against the possible consequences.

### 2.3 Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album

"Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album" is another poem from the *Less Deceived* (1955). In the poem, speaker focuses on the empiricism of the art of photography and contemplates on passing of time. He is curious about the album which the lady at last allowed him to look. He skims through one picture to another with an excitement, as they each reveal a different phase in the lady's life. Sometimes he sees a few young men and he feels jealous but sometimes he sees her with a hat and find disturbing. Then he ponders upon the art of photography and finds it as the most faithful art, though it represents people with forced smiles and fake looks. Stephan Regan remarks that the poem "Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album" is "much more modern than its title suggests, which is more like a lady from Tennyson," and he criticizes the poem in terms of sexual connotations it bears, following a similar path with Larkin scholars (2007: 151). Though this is also a powerful discussion, my reading of the poem is more metaphorical for Larkin's poetic stand as a member of the Movement.

The speaker is in a monologue in this poem, looking at pictures, thinking and talking about them. He is amazed on the reality of the art of photography. These lines may reveal Larkin's idea of art and poetry as anti-Romantic and anti-Modernist. He portrays realist and empiricist description of environment, far from idealization or vilification. This idea was what made him turn his back to Yeats for Hardy.

But o, photography! as no art is,  
Faithful and disappointing! that records  
Dull days as dull, and hold-it smiles as frauds,  
And will not censor blemishes,  
Like washing-lines, and Hall's-Distemper boards

Like photography, Larkin is true to life in his poetry, recording what he observes, not more or less. He does not have a Wordsworthian Romantic wisdom but he finds himself as merely a man

among common man. His own life reflected this desire for the common. As a member of the Movement, he always looked for an ordinary life. He was a very successful poet but until the age of fifty he lived in rent apartments. He was also proposed to be Poet Laureate but he refused it. In his poetry as well as in his lifestyle, he wanted to be, to represent the common man with all his questionings, troubles, concerns and pleasures. Therefore, in his narration of the city-life and modern man, Larkin preferred the language of common man whom he is dealing with, not high metaphors, intertextual references or obscure sentences like Eliot, and other Modernists that he finds himself estranged from. Larkin used traditional rhyme and meter, not a distorted, fragmented structure. He is anti-Modernist in this sense that he also rejected elitism, mystification, or highbrow poetry, and wanted to create a connection with him and the reader, who would no longer need to take hours of lecture to understand his poetry. Therefore, Larkin is similar to a photographer in his poetic stand, who takes pictures in life, and “persuades” the reader that “this is a real girl in a real place”. Like the photographer in this poem, Larkin tells his readers what he saw as it is, neither with an idealization or emotionalism of Romantics nor with obscurantism or negativity of Modernists. However, in the end he usually achieves to find a kind of beauty, hope, sympathy, or even a vitality in modern realities.

In every sense empirically true!  
Or is it just the past? Those flowers, that gate,  
These misty parks and motors, lacerate  
Simply by being you; you  
Contract my heart by looking out of date.

### 3. CONCLUSION

Philip Larkin is a perfect representative of the Movement and post-war generation. He interpreted modern reality from his perspective and with a realistic, simple, clear, colloquial style that discarded both Romanticism and Modernism. Larkin is the follower of a clearly English line, with provincialism in theme, traditionalism in form, blunt representations of modern reality, refusal of idealization of the self or nature, and a kind of simplicity, and accessibility. His poetry is also personal but he does not assert the importance of his own emotions or experiences, never highlights a Romantic wisdom at the speaker, nor refers to an idealized beauty with nostalgia. His poetry remains to be “an affair of sanity,” in which he represents and in a way recreates what is familiar without any disregard of the ugliness. The speaker in his poems is usually “I”, but it is not always Larkin, the poet. He represented the condition of “simple ordinary man in an unromantic world,” as he also called himself. Therefore, his poetry is anti-Romantic in this sense.

Larkin’s poetic style also contrasted with Modernist tradition of T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, especially their elitism and obscurantism. Modernism, for Larkin, is a peculiar outcome of the new century. He feels disturbed by its concern for creating a “*new language* that was more *difficult*,” and “that required you to *work hard appreciating it*” due to its highbrow attitude. Larkin embraces a somewhat rational view in his poetry, through which he also restores the deteriorated unity between the poet and the reader of the earlier generation. In this way, he also suppresses the distress of the Modernist poet and brings him down on to earth. His anti-Modernist tendency leads him to be true to life in his poetry, like photography, recording what he observes whether positive or negative. Thus, in each poem Larkin displays a different picture to the reader: sometimes a church, sometimes fading nature, and sometimes childhood. With his books of poetry, Larkin gives his poems to the hands of the readers, so that each will look at the photo with amazement and ponder upon that captured moment in words.

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