Philip Larkin (1922-1985) is always pointed at as one of the major English poets of the 1950s, if not the major one. He was born in Coventry, West Midlands, and educated at King Henry VIII Grammar School and then at St. Johns’ College, Oxford. He studied English from 1940-1943. Then became a librarian for so many years at a variety of places.

As a poet his reputation rests most on his The Less Deceived (1955) which brought him into recognition as an important poet, and also on his association with the Movement. The Movement arose in the mid 1950s around the works and thoughts of three young men: Philip Larkin, Kingsley Amis and John Wain. Three poets who are, as M. L. Rosen believes, “very unlike one another, yet sharing certain perspective and distrust of flamboyant mannerisms or Romantic attitudes.”(1) The Movement might have begun a little bit earlier i.e late in the 1940s in the writings of some poets and writers like Oscar Mellor, John Wain, G. S. Fraser and Iain Fletcher, whose critical readings and literary products were among the early manifestations of this new spirit which rejected the “1940s sinister corrupters of poetic taste.”(2) But, since no body was quite clear on what this new spirit stood for, it was commonly called “the Movement”.

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In October 1954, the first announcement of this new trend in poetry appeared in *The Spectator*. It called itself “The Movement”. The writers or poets belonging to the movement are many: Elizabeth Tennings, John Hotlaways, Thom Guvn, P. J. Enright, Ponald Davie and Robert Conquest under whose editorship *The New Lines* anthology appeared in 1956 to include all the names previously mentioned along with Larkin, Amis and Wain. They all represented an intellectual reaction against the Neo-romantic of the 1940s especially Dylan Thomas. They demanded that intelligence and intelligibility should be regarded as essential virtues in poetry, Robert Conquest called for a renewed attention to the “necessary intellectual component in poetry viewed from a common sense stand point”. The great theoretical constructs and the agglomeration of unconscious commands were to be rejected infavor of reverence for the real person or event and the conventional English norms, the iambic pentameter or tetrameter line.

The poetry of the Movement was intelligent, Knowledgeable, polished and reactionary against the historical one of war literature and against the faults of such poets as Dylan Thomas whom Conquest accused of destroying the taste of the poetry reading public and insiting on the debilitating theory that poetry must be metaphorical.” Also Conquest, in
his articles summarized the qualities of the poetry of the Movement

_In one sense, indeed, the standpoint is not new, but merely the restoration of a sound and fruitful attitude to poetry, of principle, that poetry is written by and the whole, man, intellect, emotion, senses and all …_

_It is free from both mystical and logical compulsions, and like modern philosophy is empirical in its attitude to all that comes”_.

Of all the poets of the Movement, it was Philip Larkin who gained the celebration and admiration of Robert Conquest who championed him and considered him an incarnation of all the principles of the Movement and an outstanding epitome of what has been stated above.

Likewise, A. Alvarez in _The New Poetry_ wrote that the great moderns, “the poets of the Movement experimented not just to make it new formally, but to open poetry up to new areas of experience”._(6)_ What they wrote was academic-administrative verse, polite, efficient, ….etc.. Alvarez stated that the outset of Larkin’s poem _Church Going_ summarizes all the features and the pieties of the poets of the Movement.

_Once I am sure there’s nothing going on_
_I step inside, letting the door thud shut_
_Another church; matting, seats, and ston._

…………………………………………

_Hatless, I take off_
_May cycle-clips in awkward reverence_(_7)_
The poet in this image, appears to be “shabby and not concerned with his appearance; poor—he has a bike not a car: gauche but full of agnostic piety: underfed, underpaid, over taxed hopeless, bored wry”.\(^{(8)}\) The mage of the post-war poet is utterly different from his predecessors. He is no longer a super-human or a strange creature inspired, nor enclosed in his ivory tower. On the contrary “he is just like the man next door, in fact, he is probably the man next door.”\(^{(9)}\)

Philip Larkin is truly “a man next door” as a poet and as a man too. He began writing after the World War II, in the midst of disillusionment and uncertainty, but he advocated the simple and clear notions rather than the complex and vague ones. For this reason he rejected all the artificialities, vagueness, and difficulties of the modern poetry. He refused what Pound and Eliot adhered in making modern poetry difficult and highly symbolic, allusive and dependent on myths. Such poetry, Larkin believed never covers life as it is. Poetry should be the poetry of every man, not of the intellectual elite. The poet on the other hand, should be a neighbor to the reader who feels what the reader feels. Poetry should please, not mystify the reader, and put him in an amaze.

Moreover, as a Movement poet, the does not trust the neo-romantic tendency of the 1940s which was excessively sentimental and more concerned with the exploration subconscious mind.
E. L. Black tells us that the virtues of Larkin’s poetry are clarity and elegance. Larkin has a reliable instinct for orderly arrangement and a respect for formal perfection. His best poems are almost all concerned with contemporary life in Britain, the life of towns and the suburbs. But, there is also in category of his poems which looks back to a countryside where there is a good deal of wind and rain, especially in his poems. His poems show a keen eyesight catching the minute details of life which go unnoticed by others. He focuses on them and accurately describes them with realistic views. He gives what might be called “an accurate photography” of what he sees. The little details on which he concentrates do not confine him or limit his subject matter to themselves only. They always serve as windows from which he can enter to wider English themes that used to be frequent in the 1850s.

The range of Larkin’s themes is too wide as Antony Thawaite remarks. A list which includes innocence, the pathos, and grim, humour of experience, the poignancy of the past, the change and renewal of nature, the dread of the future, death and all that lead up to it and away from it …etc. But his treatment of such a range of subject matter runs from the concrete to the flat abstractions, lacking in the precise circumstantial figurativeness and sensitive cadences. Larkin is also, as John Lucas described him, sad and nostalgic. He was preoccupied with a sense of sadness. For him neither childhood
nor love is an outlet to escape from sadness: “childhood was a
gotten boredom, and it is silly to expect much happiness from
love”(14) Yet, there is a sense of nostalgia which shows itself in
Going, Going, or “Homage to A Government” in which he
regrets a glorious abandoned past of his own and of his nation as
well. The first poem is about the “disappearance of a presumed
pastoral England.”(15) In Send no money, a poem in Larkin’s
The Whitsun Wedding (1964), he describes himself as an
alienated observer who chooses to observe what happens to life
rather than to have a bash at it himself as all other lads ….”but
the result”

\[
\begin{align*}
& \text{Half life is over now ...} \\
& \text{And I meet full face on dork momings.} \\
& \text{The bestial viser, bent in} \\
& \text{By the blows of what happened to happen} \\
& \text{What does it prove ? Sad all} \\
& \text{In this way I spent youth.} \\
\end{align*}
\]

\text{Lines 1-6}

This theme of a detached observer who refused to
participate the theme of self alienation, is repeated over and over
in Larkin’s poetry. It may provide an objective stand to the
reporter who sees and transmits what he sees in an eloquent
manner. Sometimes, he is present in the situation he describes,
but he presents himself as a fastidious observer of the human
scene, as a disinterested and a condescending outsider, looking
down metaphorically and literary at the others. This is perfectly
applicable to his situation in his *Whitsun Weddings*, a poem which will be discussed in details later on.

More than once Larkin appears to be more like a tourist travelling through England and many of his poems are set in trains, many others make use of shops and shoppers in order to give the flavor of contemporary England. Such poems are *The Large Cool stone* and *Here*. Such a flavor is enhanced by the use of direct speech about work as in *Toads* and *Toad Revisited*.

With regard to the language and the forms, Larkin uses the conversational ordinary language with no decorations and elaboration. His words heighten the common place experience concretely, in respect of its impact on the senses, as Harry Blamers believes\(^{(16)}\). In *Ambulance* the children and the women in the road, coming from the shops, suddenly catch sight of.

*A wild white face that overtops  
Red stretches blankets momentarily  
Lines 10-11*

And sense the “Solving emptiness, that lies just under all we do.” The language employed is not easily grasped by the reader, it has also a sound/sight effect which clarifies the poet’s themes.

Larkin shows a remarkable talent in craftsmanship which enable him to build up a firm structure in his poems, so as to portray the realistic details of his contemporary scene in a
language which has a recognizable rhythm and a consistent polishes. His poetry fits naturally into rhymed and obviously metrical verse which inherits the traditional orients of poetry." (17) His poems are considered technical and imaginative triumphs due to his wonderfully inventive metaphors and his cunning rhythms, and the dramatic use of line endings. Even his employment of the colloquial coarseness is highly poetical.

Larkin’s poetic output includes: The North Ship (1945), The Less Deceived (1955) Whitsun Wedding (1964), and High Windows (1974). The most celebrated and anthologized poem of Larkin is the Whitsun Wedding which is considered by all critics his best poem. The poet travelling in the train from Hull to London for the whitsun holiday on a Saturday describes what he sees through the train window. Then he becomes a ware of the newly married couples who join the train at one of the intervening situation. That is the main subject of the poem.

In fact, the poem has a wide and inclusive scene of England, not a mere description of a landscape seen through the window of the train, Larkin’s journey allows us to see England in such a way that all of England feels to be on view. (18) The glimpses are blended in Larkin’s observant eye. But they give tremendous implications. The time is afternoon in a hot, sunny day:
All afternoon, through the tall heat slept
For miles inland,

Wide Farms went by, short shadowed cattle, and
Canals with floating of industrial forth;
A hot house flashed uniquely, hedges dipped
And rose, and now and then a smell of grass
Displaced the reek of buttoned courage-cloth
Until the next town new and non descriptor,
Approached with acres of dismantled cars

Lines 11-20

This description Gavin Ewart believes,\(^{(19)}\) is the best description of a summer railway journey in England to be found anywhere, in prose or verse. Such lines give an accurate photography-as mentioned earlier. They also suggest how shallow and spiritually impoverished are the lives of many of the people who live in these industrial surroundings.

As the journey progresses, the poet begins to notice the wedding parties on the platforms. The newly married couples are travelling in a journey other than their real journey to London. The journey of life as T. S. Eliot believes consist of “birth, copulation, and death.”\(^{(20)}\) and these young couples have reached the midway stage of this journey. The poet, in contrast with the couples, is a bachelor. He watched both the landscape with the couples. As he contemplates life deeply, he develops a sarcasting and mocking scene in his observance of the people;

We passed them grinning and pomaded. Girls
In parodies of fashion, heels and veils
The men are “grinning and pomaded” and the girls, because this is all they have, wear parodies of fashion. These are working class people. For the children, wedding are dull. For fathers they are a joke. In stanza.7. the Odeon is a cinema, the man running up to bowl is a cricker:

\begin{quote}
And someone running up to bowl and none
Thought of the others they would never meet
Or how their lives would all contain this hour
\end{quote}

\begin{center}
Lines 66-68
\end{center}

As the journey moves towards its end, the participants in the marriage are unaware of this, and unaware of the poets presence. Once again, in the poem, one is reminded of Larkin’s talent of exact observation.

Technically speaking, the poem is also perfect. Larkin does not put a foot, or a word wrong and the “tone is maintained throughout there are no lapses, no awkwardness. This is all the more remarkable since the rhyming scheme of the stanza he has chosen to use is not a simple one.\(^{(21)}\)
Notes


5. As quoted in Black, p.151.


15. Lucas, p.197.
Bibliography