LARKIN'S MASKS: THE ANXIETY OF BAKHTIN'S INFLUENCE

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Abstract:In 1985, when Philip Larkin died, his reputation as a writer was secure because his intention was to write a "less deceived" poetry which would break away from prevailing poetic trends. His poetry was perceived to be ironic, but also decent and tolerant; poetry and traits of his personality seem unusually compact and his idea of poetry was realism mixed with irony.
The purpose of the hereby paper is to present Larkin's ability to hide himself behind various masks. More, his "selves" build a function of the way language appears in his poetry and his work represents a striking instance of Mihail Bakhtin's description of dialogic discourse. As a final remark, Larkin's poems seem not to have been written as a confession; they try to represent the efforts to achieve self-definition.

Keywords: masks, self-revealing, self-protective, drama, selves.

The few visitors to Philip Larkin's flat in 32 Pearson Park, Hull, as Harry Chambers wrote in 'Meeting Philip Larkin', where Larkin lived for eighteen years, were able to notice in his bathroom a montage 'juxtaposing Blake's "Union of Body and Soul" with a Punch-type cartoon of the front and back legs of a pantomime horse pulling in opposite directions against one another and said "Ah, at last I've found you!"[1] For an intensely private man, Larkin was strangely willing to offer public portraits of himself, however self-parodyingly laconic. The most public revelations of his self-protecting privacy are, of course, his poems. The pursed-up bachelor in 'Spring', the cynically debunking revenant of 'I remember, I remember', the sniggering agnostic of 'Church Going', the rootless, childless, provincial librarian, the nostalgic elegist, are masks behind which the reader is invited to discover aspects of the poet's own identity. But the intention is not to analyze Larkin's personality in his rhetorical constructions of his poems and the ways in which they aspire to things 'out of reach'. His poems are attempts to occupy the imaginative space of 'somewhere you are not' and are ultimately concerned with existential questions of identity, choice and chance, isolation and communality.

Larkin is a more adventurous, challenging and provocatively 'modern' writer than some of his critics and some of his admirers said:

Larkin's bathroom collage identifies the conflicts from which his poetry emerged the visionary integration of the spiritual and corporeal mockingly juxtaposed with the comic disintegration of the pantomime horse. Every impulse in Larkin was met and matched by its opposite, and the collage reveals the fundamental collision in Larkin which determined the nature of his work. In his poetry we find expressed a lifelong argument between the artist and the philistine, between aspiring aestheticism (represented by Blake) and the iconoclastic mockery of the cartoon. Larkin's work is very far removed from 'genteel bellyaching' and provincial unadventurousness.[2]

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[1] Stephen Regan, _Philip Larkin, Contemporary Critical Essay_, Macmillan Press, London, 1997, p. 221.
[2] Stephen Regan, _Philip Larkin, Contemporary Critical Essay_, Macmillan Press, London, 1997, p. 212.

It seems that two powerful forces in Larkin: the passionate desire to live his life, being devoted just to writing, and the fury of having that desire thwarted. DJ. Enright noted that Larkin "doesn't altogether trust poetry, not even his own."3

Anthony Thwaite assembled a Collected Poems in 1988, putting together published poems, printing some of the longer fragments from Larkin's manuscripts and making a selection from the unpublished poems Larkin wrote before The North Ship and The Less Deceived. All of a sudden, this offered a different impression of Larkin from the one he had carefully 'cultivated'. He was revealed as having written much more than he had assumed, with nearly eighty unfamiliar poems appearing in addition to the ones already published. In his review of the Collected Poems, regarding Larkin's "If, My Darling", Blake Morrison said: It's the first poem in which Larkin shows signs of dramatizing himself... Once he could wear his defeat like an overcoat, not hide beneath it, Larkin was away, […] what we have should be enough to ensure that Larkin will never again be patronized as a dried-up toad squatting on modernism, but be seen as an original obsessive, deep-feeling poet who consistently refused the consolations of conventional belief.4

But not only are his poems important for somebody to create an idea about Larkin's 'writing world'. Even his letters are part of his personality as a writer. Andrew Motion's biography, published shortly after the letters, revealed more from Larkin's way of thinking, not only in his relationships with women, but in the strategies by which he presented himself to the world. Ian Hamilton noticed that: the Larkin 'revealed' in the letters had been before us all the time in the poems, but these were usually so well judged, as dramas or confessions, that we could speak also of a Larkinesque 'persona'- a self-projection that might in part be a disguise.5

Hamilton returns the reader to the problem of Larkin's 'masks' and to the rhetorical strategies which make his poems 'simultaneously self-revealing and self-protective.'

'Posterity' is a poem in which Larkin can pretend to build his own epitaph. Its joke is that the poem's speaker is said to be an uncomprehending American biographer and this American will have to tolerate the Englishman, boring as a matter of fact. The point of the poem seems to give the feeling that the American understood everything wrong. But, in fact, this is what makes the poem 'sentimental, smug and vain, and the poem simply does not leave its speaker with that kind of triumph.'6

'Self's the Man' seems to be an attack on the idea of marriage by a relieved bachelor who suddenly confesses to uncertainty. But the real confession in the poem is the smugness in arguing that 'Self's the Man' for everybody. This makes the critics to consider Larkin's poems, in a simple way, as being multivocal. They always seem to have an 'I' who addresses a 'you', thus relying on the condition of the speech-acts and they are 'performative' in being built with an explicit consciousness of the impression which they are creating; their 'voices' seem to express attitudes sometimes ecstatic (as in 'Solar' and 'Water') and often mocking, and frequently epigrammatic in following the philosophical 'truth'. Even at their most declarative moment (as in their use of coarse language), the poems 'carry a highly self-conscious rhetorical persuasiveness.'7

The English philosopher J.L. Austin thought of all language as 'performative', this meaning not so much involved in making statements as in asking gestures of intention and

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3 Ibid.
4 Stephen Regan, *Philip Larkin, Contemporary Critical Essay*, Macmillan Press, London, 1997, p. 213.
5Ibid., p. 214.
6Ibid., p. 215.
7 Ibid.

producing calculated effects. Terry Eagelton, in his Literary Theory: An Introduction from 1983, paraphrases: Literature may appear to be describing the world, and sometimes actually does so, but its real function is performative: it uses language within certain conventions in order to bring about certain effects in a reader. It achieves something in the saying: it is language as a kind of material practice in itself, discourse as social action.8

Or, in Larkin's case, the discourse seems to be social interaction. The personae or 'masks' by which Larkin's attitudes evolve from his command of idiom, often of caricature: the landlady's chatter in 'Mr. Bleaney', [..] the academic's complacent hypocrisies in 'Naturally the Foundation will Bear Your Expenses', his biographer Americanism and finally the whole argot of advertising imagery.9

'Populated' by social types and embodiments of stereotypical attitudes, Larkin's place in foreground the metonymic aspect of language, the capacity to suggest the whole by the representative part. They seem to be the speech-acts, somehow dramatised, of a speaker, who trying to take part in, succeeds in dealing with the drama of Larkin's poems. George Watson, in his British Literature since 1945, defined in terms which would suit better to Larkin, what it appears to be the 'eccentric stance' in poetry:

It arises out of a highly insular tradition of conversation: amusingly semi-earned talk, richly allusive, vivified by a speaker into social performance – the British, as foreigners often remark, tending to be actors, or at least mimics and by a speaker conscious of himself as a character and eager to impart that consciousness to others, whether as entertainment, self-defensive deceit, or both…10

As a remark, in an interview, Larkin once said about his poems: Don't judge me by them. Some are better than me, but I add up to more than they do.11

As a matter of fact, Larkin's 'selves' build a function of the way language appears in Larkin's poetry and his work represents a striking instance of Mikhail Bakhtin's description of dialogic discourse. Bakhtin's idea was to evolve a poetics of the novel which would account for its historical rise to pre-eminence as a genre, but the terms and conceptions he used offer a helpful approach to Larkin, especially when Larkin gave up writing novels and began to write the poems.

David Lodge explained that for Bakhtin the literary discourse is rather performative and that a word is not so much a two-sided sign as, in Bakhtin words, a two-sided act. ..It is determined equally by whose word it is and for whom it is meant... A word is territory shared by both addresser and addressee, by the speaker and his interlocutor.12

For Bakhtin, the 'multivocal polyphony' is the medium of the novel (Larkin's poetry will nevertheless claim this polyphony to a certain extent):

Herein lies the profound distinction between prose style and poetic style...for the prose artist the world is full of other people's words, among which he must orient himself and whose speech characteristics he must be able to perceive with a very keen ear. He must introduce them into the plane of his own discourse, but in such a way that this plane is not destroyed. He works with a very rich verbal palette. 13

8Ibid., p. 215.
9Ibid., p. 216.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
12 David Lodge,*After Bakhtin: Essays on Fictions and Criticism*, London, 1990, p. 90.
13Ibid., p. 91.

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Moreover, the use of direct speech in Larkin's poems functions in the way described by Lodge:Characters, and the persona of the authorial narrator...are constituted not simply by their own linguistic registers or idiolects, but by the discourses they quote and allude to.

A corollary of Bakhtin's insight is that language which in itself is flat, banal, clichéd and generally automatised can become vividly expressive when mimicked, heightened, stylised, parodied and played off against other kinds of language in the polyphonic discourse of the novel.14

Lodge shows how Bakhtin came to doubt that any literary text could be purely 'monologic' and to conclude that all literary discourse is to some extent inherently dialogic. He quotes this fragment from Larkin:

Doesn't the author always find himself outside of language in its capacity as the material of the literary work? Isn't every writer (even the purest lyric poet) always a 'playwright' insofar as he distributes all the discourses among alien voices, including that of the 'image of the author' (as well as the author's other personae)? It may be that every single-voice and nonobjectal discourse is naive and inappropriate to authentic creation. The authentically creative voice can only be a second voice in the discourse. Only the second voice – pure relation, can remain nonobjectal to the end and cast no substantial and phenomenon shadow. The writer is a person who knows how to work language while remaining outside of it, he has the gift of indirect speech.15

In this case, the development of Larkin's poetry can be seen asthe progress towards manipulating language while remaining outside of it, when the embarrassed aestheticism of the early lyrics gives way to the dramatisation of unaesthetic experience.16

Bakhtin's remarks are useful because they distinguish between the writer and what he writes by reminding the readers the 'materiality' of the world in which the writer lives. Moreover, they offer an approach to Larkin's poems which begins to get the reader away from Larkin's criticism which presents his themes (love, time, death) or analyses his poetic style in terms of its 'faithfully mimetic representation of an unmediated 'reality.'"17 Bakhtin's remarks make the reader focus on Larkin's rhetoric, on the ways in which his poems build themselves as speech-acts in order to persuade the reader into one point of view or another. The theme of identity arises from Larkin's situation as a writer 'outside' his language. His poems are not written as a confession and they try to represent the effort to achieve self-definition. In this way, Larkin can be considered an existential argument about the nature of individual identity, about the existential authority of choice and chance , about the articulation of an abuse self. Larkin approached these issues through the vocabulary of separateness, of exclusion and difference, establishing a kind of negative self-definition. His sense of identity is often expressed in the vocabulary of nullity and anonymity suggesting both the ultimate desire for oblivion and an absolute terror of death.18

As language becomes more multivocal in Larkin's poems, so they become more rhetorically devious in portraying versions of himself. Anxiously preoccupied with marriage and death, with solitude and communality, 'the poems continue the nature of identity by

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14Ibid., pp. 92+3.
15Ibid., pp. 97-8.
16Ibid., p. 218.
17Ibid.
18Ibid.,p. 219.

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nurturing a precious reticence'.19 In 1992, Tom Paulin, in his Minotaur: Poetry and the Nation State said:

Larkin speaks not for the imperial male-too transcendental a subject that – but for the English male, middle-class, professional, outwardly confident, controlled and in control The history of that distinctive personality has yet to be written, but anyone who has observed it as a phenomenon, as a distinctive pattern of behaviour and attitude is bound to see Larkin as a secret witness to what it feels like to be imprisoned in a personality that 'something hidden from us chose'. Thus Larkin's favourite romantic value, 'solitude', designates the consciousness of the autonomous English male professional. It refers not to physical isolation but to a consciousness which has been moulded by upbringing and education to manage and govern. Such personalities...are seldom attractive, but what is so lovable about Larkin's persona is the evident discomfort he feels with the shape of the personality he has been given. Angry at not being allowed to show emotion, he writes with anxiety inside that sealed bunker which is the English ethic of privacy. He journeys into the interior, into the unknown heart - the maybe missing centre- of Englishness.20

Paulin's interpretation rests on an ideological point of view of language. For Paulin, the lyric voice 'promises an exit from history into personal emotion', but his argument turns on there being no escape from 'social experience'.21 So, for Paulin, Larkin's imagined sites of solitude, the 'padlocked cube of light,' the isolated fortress of the lighthouse, the high windows of the bachelor flat and library office, are versions of Yeats's mystic symbol of the platonic poet in his ancient tower. But English reticence cannot reveal that kind of romanticism, and so Larkin conceals his sense of himself behind masks of pretended disclosure and self-disgust. So Paulin concludes thatin that distinctively embarrassed English manner he had to bury his pride in his artistic creations under several sackfuls of ugly prejudices.22

Larkin's poetry is the pursuit of difference, the thing just out of reach, the being different from yourself. His outsiderness was an outsiderness to language as well, manipulating it as a dialogic negotiation with otherness: personae, caricatures, the reader. Ultimately, his poems create a community of difference: uncles shouting smut, mothers loud and fat, girls marked off unreally from the rest, grim head-scarved wives, young mothers at swing and sandpit, the men you meet of an afternoon Dockery and son, and. fundamentally, writer and reader.23

In one of his poems called 'Continuing to Live', Larkin wondered about the value of defining his own identity:

And what's the profit? Only that, in time

We half-identify the blind impress

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[19]Ibid., p. 221.
[20] Ibid.
[21]Ibid., p. 222.
[22] Ibid.
[23]Ibid., p. 223.

All our behavings bear. may trace it home.

But to confess.

On that green evening when our death begins.

Just what it was, is hardly satisfying,

Since it applied only to one man once.

And that one dying.24

It seems that the effort in Larkin's poems is to find continuities, this becoming a way of defining the self not 'in terms of separateness, but in its sensitiveness to otherness.'25 Thus, Larkin's poems 'speak' to and for the reader in their representative individuality, in their need to define the 'blind impress which chance has given him, to make a self for himself by redescribing that impress in terms which are, if only marginally, his own'.26

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24 Anthony Thwaite, *Collected Poems*, Faber and Faber, London, 1988.
25 Sephan Regan, *Philip Larkin, Contemporary Critical Essay*, Macmillan Press, London, 1997, p. 223.
26Ibid., p. 224.

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