

THE LAST LINES IN SELECT POEMS OF PHILIP LARKIN

Pintu Karak

Department of English , University of Burdwan , West Bengal.

Abstract:

The present paper seeks to explore the significance of the last lines in select poems of Philip Larkin who is a major British poet of the post-war era. The last lines in some famous poems like "An Arundel Tomb", "Ambulances" and "The Whitsun Weddings" provide new dimensions. The last lines are highly ambiguous. Being an efficient artist, Larkin is aware of the clinching effect of a poem. The last lines are open-ended. The ending of a poem marks, as it were, a new beginning. Although the 'mysterious' last lines appear to bear positive meanings, in the ultimate analysis they befit Larkin's pessimistic attitude towards life.

KEY WORDS:

Larkin, pessimism, ambiguous, sense of falling.

INTRODUCTION:

Philip Arthur Larkin occupies an important place in the tradition of English poetry. He is one of the major British poets of the post-war era. Critics are at loggerheads with each other about his status as a poet. Whereas some critics such as Kirkham, Tomlinson and Falck have pointed out some loopholes in Larkin's poetry; some like Andrew Motion, Alan Jones and Donald Davie have eulogised his achievement as a poet. If John Wain, one of Larkin's contemporary poets, considers him to be the 'best' poet in his time, Alun Jones opines in "The Poetry of Philip Larkin: A Note on Transatlantic Culture":

It is in the poetry of Philip Larkin that the spirit of the 1950's finds its most complete expression in English poetry (Jones, 145).

As a poet, Larkin's reputation hinges on his four major volumes of poetry. His first published volume of poems was *The North Ship* (1945) where the influence of W. B. Yeats could be noticed. His next collection of poems was *The Less Deceived* which was published in 1955. His next volume of poetry was *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964) where the clear influence of Thomas Hardy could be seen. Some of his poems were published in two significant anthologies of the time - *Poets of the 1950s* (edited by D. J. Enright in 1950) and *New Lines* (edited by Robert Conquest in 1956). In the anthology *New Lines* (1956) Robert Conquest brings together some 'Movement Poets' – Donald Davie, John Holloway, Kingsley Amis, Philip Larkin and others – who were against their predecessors in their avoidance of modernist trends and their disdain of inordinate romanticism. Larkin's poems bear testimony to this new group of poets. Larkin's poems are

concise, elegantly and economically descriptive, versatile in their use of forms, endlessly suggestive of deeper resonances in the scenes they paint. Perhaps more than this, it became evident from the reception of the poetry that Larkin was far more than a craftsman: that there was a profound affinity between the characteristic moods and tones of his poetry and the currents of feeling running through Britain itself in the forty years of his writing career (Punter,5).

The present paper seeks to elucidate the significance of the last lines in some poems of Larkin. The last lines in the select poems of Larkin offer new dimensions, sudden twists and unexpected reversals of

THE LAST LINES IN SELECT POEMS OF PHILIP LARKIN

the poet's conceptions.

Analysis:

Larkin's poem "An Arundel Tomb" from the volume of poems entitled *The Whitsun Weddings* apparently seems to be a poem that celebrates the dignity, profundity and majesty of love. To analyse the last lines one should at first try to discover the ambiguity of the poem. The poem was inspired by Larkin's visit to Chichester Cathedral where he witnessed the gorgeous monument to the Earl of Arundel and his wife. In the poem, the earl and the countess 'lie' side by side holding hands which justify their mutual loyalty towards each other. Time has made its ruinous attack on the plain and unsophisticated ('pre-baroque') statues. Their faces have been 'blurred' by the swift flow of time. Their costumes are 'vaguely shown'. All these ordinary descriptions of the earl and his wife hardly attract the eyes of a passer-by. Yet a passer-by would look with utmost care, 'with a sharp tender shock' at the statues as the Earl's left hand has been shown as clutching the hand of his wife. In the third stanza the poet raises a question about their mutual attachment:

They would not think to lie so long.
Such faithfulness in effigy (Larkin, 110)

Although the lover and the beloved are faithful, it is 'faithfulness' in effigy and not in reality. Here the poet possibly mocks at the bond of the duo – the Earl and the Countess. The poet further adds that perhaps this attachment was an embellishment on the part of the sculptor. Therefore it cannot be real. Probably the couple could not have foreseen the deadly attack of 'air' that has silently been eroding the stone-statues. As a consequence, an 'old tenantry' or a viewer would only give a cursory glance over the carving. They would be able to 'look' at the statues without being able to 'read' properly. It is really interesting to note that the statues have survived, thereby ignoring the corrosive effect of time. A huge number of people have come to wash at the 'identity' of the couple. Now the two figures have lost their significance to the modern visitors. They have become as unsubstantial as a trough of smoke. What is interesting to note that though they have become tiny fragments of history, their reciprocal love, or to put it more appropriately, 'an attitude' lasts forever. In the final stanza the poet once again proceeds to describe the insuperable and insurmountable power of time:

Time has transfigured them into
Untruth. ... (Larkin, 111)

The statues have undergone a sea-change. But it is ironical to note that the statues have been transformed into 'untruth'. Even if the poet speaks of mutual allegiance, it is only 'stone fidelity' - an expression which reminds one of Keats' famous phrases 'Cold Pastoral' in "Ode on a Grecian Urn". This 'stone fidelity' is something that they 'hardly meant'. So the insinuation is that their mutual affection is only an appearance without any aura of truthfulness.

...The stone fidelity
They hardly meant has come to be
Their final blazon, and to prove
Our almost-instinct almost true:
What will survive of us is love (Larkin, 111).

The last line seems to carry an affirmative meaning. Sisir Kumar Chatterjee describes that the poem "ends on a rhapsodic note of affirmation about the eternal validity of love" (Chatterjee, 224). But there is also a note of scepticism and dubiety expressed in the last line. John Saunders asserts, "the tomb may not really mean what it seems to mean, that what we would like to take as a beautiful, comforting 'truth' about love, is in fact a deception." (Saunders, 47). Christopher Ricks avers – "If you were to stress both 'survive' and 'us', the line would not survive the plethora; and if you were to stress neither, the line would not survive the inanity. The line's compactness is that two lines, identical in wording but not in intonation, occupy exactly the same space." (Ricks, 122). Ricks further points out that the last line is charged with "apophthegmatic weight of classical art" (Ricks, 276). The aphoristic last line is so appealing and so vibrating that it defies time and deifies love. The last line thus seems to be ambiguous. As Chatterjee explains:

The phrase "almost-instinct almost true" indeed implies that the joined hands may almost be a true

THE LAST LINES IN SELECT POEMS OF PHILIP LARKIN

statement because the mason's instinct for what would best represent his subject merges with the modern observer's example of a "perennial human need to believe in love – a need the poet here acknowledges even while refusing to give his assent to it (Chatterjee, 227).

Andrew Swarbrick says – "What will survive us is not love, but time itself as it progresses onwards from us into the future. The conclusion, although unsentimental, is yet far from bleak. In the context of the poem's development, it is consolatory and compassionate. The final line stands as an assertion to which the poet cannot give complete assent. But it represents an ideal which, even if we fall short of it, ennoble us. In a structure of reality that refuses to accommodate our dreams and desires, that is flawed, painful and disillusioning, 'almost' may be the best for which we can hope" (Swarbrick, 71). Many critics have also asserted that the line and a half before the final line seem to evaluate the real meaning of the last line. The optimistic message of the poem seems to be subverted by the existence of the two 'almost'. Further, the word 'untruth' in the last stanza refutes all positive associations. The remark of Larkin at the end of the draft of the poem adds greater sauce to this negative implication: "Love isn't stronger than death just because statues hold hands for 600 years" (qtd. in Sisir Kumar Chatterjee, 225). This opinion is consolidated by the use of some other words and expressions like 'blurred', 'lie', 'faint hint of the absurd', 'empty', 'effigy', 'sweet commissioned grace', 'altered people', 'scrap of history', 'helpless', 'stone fidelity' and 'almost'. These words buttress Larkin's scepticism regarding the long lasting relationships in general and marriages in particular. In spite of Kirkham's discovery of the balance between negation and affirmation, the ending of the poem shows that no living couple can be perfectly happy and be constant in their love. Thus, even if the poem recounts the poet's need for human relationship, there remains a question as to whether such a thing is a reality or a rarity.

The poem "The Whitsun Weddings" from the volume *The Whitsun Weddings* is tinged with autobiographical elements. At the surface level this poem also seems to possess an affirmative ending. The poem describes a train journey that he made from Hull to London. Here the poet watches different wedding parties boarding the train at different stations. The poet gives a vivid description of what he actually sees from the window of the train – the backs of houses, a street of 'blinding windscreens', smell of fish-dock, the river, wide farms, the sight of cattle, the canals with 'floatings of industrial froth', some bushes, a hothouse and 'acres of dismantled cars'. In the third stanza the poet announces the arrival of the wedding parties. At first the poet seems totally indifferent to what is happening. He gives an explanation that the extreme heat of the sun makes him so dizzy that he feels quite uninterested. The poet continues to read a book without paying any attention to the rustle and bustle of the passengers. After a little while the poet notices the girls in 'parodies of fashion'. The relatives who come to the station to see off their friends wave goodbye to the married couples. The poet is 'struck' at this unique unison. Rousing from his slumber the poet now becomes enthusiastic about what is happening inside and outside the compartment. Now the same scenes appear different to him. He sees the weeded couples from different perspectives. Sisir Kumar Chatterjee reiterates:

His attitude to the wedding parties towards the end thus becomes humble, as his voice modulates from mockery and satire to reverence, as he has now begun to appreciate, to borrow Ronald draper's terms, "the more serious emotions that lie beneath the tawdry surface (qtd. in Sisir Kumar Chatterjee, 237).

As his cynical attitude gradually vanishes, he watches the fathers wearing broad belts under their suits. The expression 'seamy foreheads' with which the fathers are identified probably hints at their senility. Whereas smooth forehead is a mark of youth and vivacity, seamy foreheads, that is, foreheads with wrinkles is an indication of dotage. The poem once again alludes to the merciless march of time as he mentions the 'fat' mothers who are speaking loudly. The uncles are seen as uttering vulgar words that have sexual connotations. The girls are bent on augmenting their beauty and therefore they wear jewellery-substitutes. Here Larkin mocks at the fashionable nature of the women who do not decorate themselves with jewellery but jewellery-substitutes. The poet's attitude changes from detachment to attachment. The poet notices that at every station where the train stops wedding couples enter the compartment. Although they give parting advice to their departing relatives it is not a cordial advice. It is only 'thrown'. The word 'thrown' provides negative implication. It is an inauspicious word. The negative implication of the word becomes far more conspicuous when Larkin reiterates this so called 'success' as something mechanical, showy and ludicrous:

Success so huge and wholly farcical;
The women shared
The secret like a happy funeral; (Larkin, 115)

This social success is great and yet at the same time ridiculous. Huge success cannot be farcical; rather it should be grand. A perceptive reader can easily sense that even if the poet watches the scene with rapt attention, there is a sense of detached aloofness on the part of the poet. Although the women have

THE LAST LINES IN SELECT POEMS OF PHILIP LARKIN

enjoyed a quantum of pleasure, it seems to the poet that they have come to experience a 'happy funeral' – the oxymoronic phrase which marks a sense of departure. Here the nexus between life and death is conspicuous. This ominous association of marriage and death is also found in Tony Morrison. The girls meditate upon 'a religious wounding'. Ultimately they become 'free' and yet 'loaded' with the occupants. Larkin thus plays with words by using conflicting and contradictory ideas. The word 'free' is a loaded word. It may mean relief from emotional pressure and comfort from the bondage of the past. The poet's attitude is full of ambiguity. That the poet's attitude somewhat begins to change is evident from the use of the plural 'we' instead of 'I'. The poet feels a sense of attachment when he emphatically proclaims that 'we' meaning both the poet as well as newly-married couples 'hurried' towards London. Andrew Swarbrick's observation seems to be pertinent here:

A poem that began with his sense of isolation then amused detachment shifting to distaste and now a closer involvement, ends with moving compassion (Swarbrick, 51).

Thus the poem is a mixture of attachment and detachment, association and dissociation. The newly-married couples are so overcome with their own happiness that they did not think of others:

... and none
Thought of the others they would never meet
Or how their lives would all contain this hour (Larkin, 116)

The poet now envisages the city's postal districts packed like 'squares of wheat' - an image suggestive of abundance, fertility and fruitfulness. Thus the image of 'squares of wheat' carries positive message. As the train moves speedily towards London the poet is confronted with the walls of 'blackened moss'. The 'frail' journey now comes to an end:

... We slowed again,
And as the tightened brakes took hold, there swelled
A sense of falling, like an arrow-shower
Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain (Larkin, 116).

The word 'swelled' stands for plenitude. The last line is redolent of Larkin's ambivalent attitude. According to the critic P. R. King the arrow shower image refers to "the new lives of the couples shooting forth into London and falling upon a life of new hope and happiness like a shower of rain bringing forth new stalks of wheat". Rain is usually a symbol of fertility and regeneration. Therefore the image suggests procreative and regenerative power. As Swarbrick points out:

That it is an image of procreation and growth is made clear by the 'shower...rain' metaphor of fertility. This is the power 'That being changed can give': the progress towards happiness and fulfilment is undertaken even if its achievement is 'out of sight', unforeseen and uncertain. (Swarbrick, 52).

That the poem indeed ends on a positive note is confirmed by Larkin's own assertion to Anthony Thwaite:

That the poem was intended to end on a joyous, exultant note is corroborated by Larkin's instructions to Anthony Thwaite as to how the poem should be read aloud – a "level, even a plodding, descriptive note, until the mysterious last lines, when the poem should suddenly 'lift off the ground.'" "Success or failure of the poem," Larkin insisted, "depends on whether it gets off the ground on the last two lines." (qtd. in Chatterjee, 239)

Thus the ending of the poem is apparently affirmative. There is a suggestion of transcendence. As the rain-drops fall on the grounds and nourish the fields of wheat, similarly the newly-wed couples will start new lives in different parts of London. Larkin himself acknowledges that the arrows shot by the English bowmen in Laurence Olivier's film "Henry V" inspire him to write the last two lines. It is to be noted that though rain is generally taken to be a symbol of fruition, in Larkin rain emblemizes tragedy. According to Thwaite, rain in Larkin's poem does not always mean happiness. Rain, on the other hand, suggests tragedy or unfulfilment. That the poem bears negative implications is evident from the use of some words and expressions like 'frail', 'coincidence', 'blackened moss', 'happy funeral', 'unreally', 'farcical', 'sense of falling' and 'someone running up to bowl'. All these may suggest incompleteness. Barbara Everett also puts stress on the negative ending of the poem. She speaks about the "dying-fall sadness of the poem's gathered-in ending. Rain begins; London arrives; the journey is over; Eden closes" (Everett, 253). Swarbrick states:

The poem is not so sentimental as to suggest that these couples will find contentment. Rather, the journey itself is used as a metaphor for time and change (Swarbrick, 52). Thus the ending of the poem seems ambiguous. The ending is open-ended for one does not know where this

THE LAST LINES IN SELECT POEMS OF PHILIP LARKIN

arrow shower will land.

Larkin is a pessimistic poet. One of the fine examples of Larkin's nihilism is found in "Ambulances" – a poem which shows Larkin's preoccupation with death and suffering. The very sight of an ambulance is frightening and frightful. It creates repulsion in the beholders. What the poet captures in the poem is the randomness and inevitability of death:

... the unique random blend
Of families and fashions, there
At last begin to loosen. ... (Larkin, 132)

The ending of the poem is tinged with melancholy and gloom:

And dulls to distance all we are (Larkin, 132).

But there are some poems like "Wedding- wind", "Coming", "Here" and "Water" which seems to end with a possibility of satisfaction. In the poem "Church Going" the poet's attitude changes from scepticism to affirmation as he finally realizes the real significance of visiting to a church. Again in the poem "Maiden Name" the poet ultimately recognizes the deeper significance of the woman's maiden name. The ending of the poem "Reasons for Attendance" strikes a note of scepticism and dubiety.

CONCLUSION:

Larkin is a conscious artisan. He is aware of the ultimate effect of a poem. He believes that a poem should be completely rounded at the end. The last lines are highly ambiguous. They are open-ended. But actually this is not an end. The ending can lead to infinite possibilities. The ending is the new beginning. The last lines are indeed 'mysterious'. Under the veneer of promise and fulfilment, poems like "An Arundel Tomb", "Ambulances" and "The Whitsun Weddings" ultimately betray signs of disintegration and incoherence. There is a 'sense of falling' to borrow an expression from "The Whitsun Weddings". Thus even if Larkin describes love, it is only a deception of love. To conclude it may be said that the last lines in some of the poems of Larkin probably conform to his pessimistic outlook towards life.

WORKS CITED:

- 1.Chatterjee, Sisir Kumar. Philip Larkin – Poetry that Builds Bridges. Delhi: Atlantic, 2006.Print.
- 2.Everett, Barbara. Poets In Their Time: Essays on English Poetry – From Donne to Larkin. London: Faber and Faber, 1986.Print.
- 3.Jones, Alun. "The Poetry of Philip Larkin: A Note on Transatlantic Culture". Western Humanities Review, xvi (1962).Print.
- 4.Briggs, Harold E., ed. John Keats. New York: The Modern Library, 1951.Print.
- 5.King, P. R. Nine Contemporary Poets: A Critical Introduction. London: Methuen, 1979.Print.
- 6.Larkin, Philip. Collected Poems. Ed. Anthony Thwaite. London: The Marvell Press and Faber and Faber, 1988.Print.
- 7.Larkin, Philip. Selected Letters of Philip Larkin 1940-1985.Ed.Anthony Thwaite. London: Faber and Faber, 1992.Print.
- 8.Ricks, Christopher. 'Like Something Almost Being Said'. Larkin at Sixty. ed. Anthony Thwaite. London: Faber and Faber, 1982.Print.
- 9.Ricks, Christopher. The Force of Poetry. New York: Oxford University Press, 1984.Print.
- 10.Saunders, John. "Beauty and truth in three poems from The Whitsun Weddings". Critical Essays on Philip Larkin: The Poems. Longman Literature Guides. Eds. Linda Cookson and Bryan Loughrey. Essex: Longman, 1989.Print.
- 11.Swarbrick, Andrew. Macmillan Master Guides: The Whitsun Weddings and The Less Deceived by Philip Larkin. Houndmills: Macmillan, 1986.Print.



Pintu Karak

Department of English , University of Burdwan , West Bengal.

The list of poems by Philip Larkin come mostly from the four volumes of poetry published during his lifetime: *The North Ship* (July 1945). *The Less Deceived* (November 1955, dated October). *The Whitsun Weddings* (February 1964). *High Windows* (June 1974). Philip Larkin (1922–1985) also published other poems. They, along with the contents of the four published collections, are included in the 2003 edition of his *Collected Poems* in two appendices. The previous 1988 edition contains everything that appears in Poet Philip Larkin talking about his new anthology 'The Oxford Book of 20th Century English Verse' prior to its inclusion on the BBC television series 'Poetry Prom', July 1973. (Photo by Barry Wilkinson/Radio Times via Getty Images). Most critics feel, however, that the poems of both William Butler Yeats and Thomas Hardy exerted an influence on Larkin as he sought his own voice. Hardy's work provided the main impetus to Larkin's mature poetry, according to critics. In Philip Larkin, Martin commented that the poet saw the need for poetry to move toward the "paying customer." Therefore, his writings concretize many of the questions which have perplexed man almost since his beginning but which in modern times have become the province principally of academicians. Selected Letters of Philip Larkin 1940-1985. Philip Larkin. Philip Larkin: Subversive Writer. Stephen Cooper. [Show full abstract] history that both poets produced; the last part deals with poetry and history and tries to frame the vision about the poetic construction of history in a broader discussion on the representation of history in order to point out some specific values of the representation of history in poetry. "Deceptions" by Philip Larkin is a two stanza poem that is made up of one set of nine lines and another set of eight. Although the two stanzas vary, they both follow rhyme schemes. The first conforms to a pattern of, ABACDCEDE while the second changes to, ABACABAC. In regards to the meter, the pattern is scattered. The lines vary from around six syllables, up to twelve and thirteen. That being said, on the page, the majority of the lines appear to be around the same length. This gives the poem an overall unity that is somewhat soothing in the face of the subject matter addressed. Explore Decep In the poetry of Philip Larkin, we may presume that with his descriptions of a very particular desolate Hull, and his humanist approach to life, he is a poet that writes very much from a viewpoint of the Self. If we look a little closer, however, we find this is not the case. In Larkin's discussion of his poem "Absences" we witness a rare admittance from the poet himself on the matter of summoning the Other, in order to write what he, in characteristic pseudo-humility claims, is quite simply "better" poetry. The last line, for instance, sounds like a slightly unconvincing translation from a French symbolist. I wish I could write like this more often.