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POETIC BEAUTY IN PHILIP LARKIN'S POETRY

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ABSTRACT

Larkin, nevertheless, remains loyal to his Movement background by placing the ideal world in the elemental, Empirical environment. The predominant tone of voice in his poems is a moderately wondrous one, as opposed to the ironic voice, which is associated with truth. However, as "Essential Beauty" has shown, the skeptical Movement part of Larkin's poetic personality cannot sustain the ideal of beauty in its unambiguous form for too long, which is why the number of prototypical "beauty" poems is limited. A more frequent occurrence in Larkin's "beauty" poems is the increasing "intrusion" of truth from the other pole on the continuum towards which Larkin is instinctively moving, and which affects and moderates the dominant idea of beauty. The changes in aesthetic values that Larkin introduces are visible even closer to the "beauty" pole but are most significant in the poems approaching the middle of the continuum.

Key words:, Empirical, beauty, continuum, intrusion, Romanticism, transcendence.

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Introduction:

The "beauty end of Larkin's poetic continuum is where he is nearest to Romanticism, in that he lets the imagination take over the more rationally discursive part of his personality and that he introduces imagist and symbolist devices to a greater degree than in other poems. Such freedom from one of the Movement's proclaimed characteristics – a strictly empirical view of the world, theoretically supported by Ayer– allows Larkin "to experience and convey a sense of Transcendence".

His emphasized symbolism in these poems reinforces the link with Keats, whose principal poetic goal was transcending time and mutability in the imperfect human world. Prototypical examples of this group are highly symbolic poems, such as "Absences" "Here" Or "Solar." Each of these

embodies an extended image of a physical space, which takes on a symbolic value: "Absences" is set on a stormy sea, "Here" swerves through a varied earthly landscape, while "Solar" evokes the flaming sun. the sea, the land and the sun –all different aspects of elemental nature- undoubtedly belong to the imaginary to the imaginary realm: "here," for example, has no speaker and is composed of jerky but purposeful and energetic, movement which halts at the point of motionless "unfenced existence," and is, therefore, a vision in the mind's eye of the poet.

The symbolic meaning and value of these envisioned spaces are more uncertain than their imaginary origin, but there seems to be more evidence for positive, eulogistic reading. The person in "absences" seems to be excited and thrilled by the powerful image of the sea expanse which has

something of the sublime in it, most probably desiring to be there, and thus, idealizing the imagined space. In other words, the given space is an epitome of beauty for the speaker, whereas in "Solar" the speaker is uttering a moderate but sincere praise to the sun, which, "unclosing like a hand forever."

The absolute beauty value of these poems is indicated by the fact that, as they are coming from the poet's imagined being, they are only secondarily concerned with the truth value of his vision. "Here" is the most ambiguous of the three, and it will serve well as an example of what it is that the poet wants to leave behind and how he imagines the "Ideal" world. Despite the deictic adverb of proximity in the title, which indicates a specific point in space and implies that there is a deictic centre of speaking, the first three stanzas represent a powerful but somewhat chaotic and even uncontrollable movement that does not have an agent. The opening of the poem consists almost entirely of non-finite present participles without clear subjects, which results in a construction foregrounding the adverbial aspect of the action. Indeed, throughout the poem one will have the impression that it is the movement towards a certain destination and the destination itself in the last stanza that matter, not the "doer" or the action. More generally, the irrelevance of the subjectivity applies to all the prototypical poems, which stresses the idea of the absolute, not tainted by any human traits.

If the poet is leaving behind the present-day industrial landscape and its attributes, it follows that the desired space and state of affairs are something older, more primitive and in an extreme case, devoid of people. The destination of Larkin's imaginative flight is described in the last stanza of "Here":

Loneliness clarifies. Here silence stands

Like heat. Here leaves unnoticed thicken,
Hidden weeds flower, neglected waters
quicken,
Luminously-peopled air ascends;
and past the poppies bluish neutral
distance
ends the land suddenly beyond a beach

of shapes and shingle. Here is unfenced
existence:

facing the sun, untalkative, out of reach.
(*Collected Poems*, p. 137)

It stands to reason that after the frenzied dashing and swerving in the previous three stanzas, this silent, motionless and unfenced space would come as a relief, symbolizing a desirable and idealized kind of existence or state of mind, hence falling into the category of beauty. To make a comparison with another poem, the "unfenced existence" can be understood as the ideal opposite of the limiting electric fences in the poem "Wires".

The ideal "Here" is, however, ambiguous since it contains loneliness, weeds and heat, which are not normally associated with something desirable and beautiful. The "bluish neutral distance" beyond the land adds to the ambiguity, and much like "The deep blue air" of "*High windows*", "leaves the readers uncertain as to the actual quality of the presumed ideal. This point of ambiguity hints at instances of Larkin's falling away from the conventional romantic idea of beauty and will be dealt with after the discussion of the prototypical "Polar" features. On a more general level, one can agree with Heaney, who claims that "Here" is a "gesture towards a realm beyond the social and historical", which, again, reminds one of the conventional romantic desire for transcendence and a super human timeless world.

According to Larkin himself, poems are born "of the tension between what he (the poet) non-verbally feels and what can be got over in common word-usage". It seems, then, that when Larkin wants to preserve the non-verbal quality of his feelings, he tries to evoke the same non-verbal response in the reader by abandoning the rhetorically and logically charged language. Instead, he is building images and symbols that will create effects as close to "pure" vision as possible.

Watson's remarks about the "more wonderful" and "land based" elements in Larkin's poetry lead the people to two further generalizations about the prototypical "beauty" poems. Firstly, the poems about the scene or felt beauty whose physical equivalent is an idealized space share a certain tone or voice. As Terry Whalen

suggests, there are two basic types of voice in Larkin, which represent two "major impulses in Larkin's poetry: the ironic and the wondrous" the former voice is often skeptical and even caustic, whereas the latter is "more sensitive and struggles toward praise".

Larkin's "beauty" poems reveal Hardy's naturalistic vein in, as Watson puts it, their "land-based" orientation, which also recalls Pound's idea of imagism. These poems have a strong imagist, or pictorial, hue, which in this case pervades the entire poem. Since the images are built around the elements and nature, Larkin remains empirical even when he is most symbolic. That is although "Absences", "Here" and "Solar" symbolize idealized spaces and states of mind or ways of existing, they are still rooted in the Earth, the Sea and the Sun. The concept of ideal beauty is thus expressed in physical terms, and although Larkin manages to create the effect of transcendence, which usually implies freedom from the empirical world, he does so by staying among the earthly elements.

To conclude about the "Polar" beauty poems: the three discussed poems – "Absences," "Solar" and "here" – are the most representative examples of the beauty impulse in Larkin's poetry (although, "Here" contains certain hints of falling away from that pole). They display the idea of beauty, typically as a space observed in the elemental world, highly "Visualizable" and symbolic. The poems have only secondary concern for the truth value of the presented vision, and the poetic voice is the one expressing wonder-in controlled, Larkinesque, tones-with the focus on sight rather than speech. In other words, it is the envisioned space that is being foregrounded, not the subjectivity. The spaces are usually unpopulated and thus removed from humanity, coming close to, if not encroaching on, the absolute and super-human.

The sharp contrast between the ideal and the real is even physically represented as the distance between the streets and the advertisement hoardings "high above the gutter", which brings to mind the echoes of "high windows." The height of the windows, showing only the "deep blue air" and the raised advertisements, showing only "how life should be" might be pointing in the same direction,

toward the uselessness and inaccessibility of ideals. The opposition between the ideal and the actual is best encapsulated in the opening of the second stanza:

Rather, they rise
Serenely to proclaim pure crust, pure foam,
Pure coldness to our live imperfect eyes
That stares beyond this world, where
nothing's made
As new or washed quite clean, seeking the
home
All such inhabit.

The essential "purity" of such advertisements which "rise serenely beyond this world" clashes with the imperfection of the people live eyes and their world where nothing is new or "quite clean".

Generally speaking, it seems that Larkin finds the romantic impulse towards the beautiful and the ideal in himself and the rest of humanity but he also sees the impracticality of these ideals and recognizes the deceitfulness and even the potential dangers in "absolute" beauty, that is, beauty untainted by truth. In other words, Larkin is not trying to change or hide the fact that the readers' instinctive reactions are still very much romantic - seeking beauty- but, being an undeceived modern man, Larkin very rarely loses sight of truth and reality, which explains why there are so few poems where the undiluted romantic idea of beauty is unambiguous, constituting the "beauty" pole of the continuum. The more he allows truth to enter the world of the poem, the more transformed is the very concept of beauty, alloyed by truth, and resulting in poems which are getting closer to the "middle-ground" poems.

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