

Poetic Language Working as a Catharsis in Philip Larkin's Poetry

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Abstract

This project investigates into the field of metaphor and symbols that are recurrent in Larkin's poetry, admitting that these notions equate the sign. Moreover, this investigation goes through the consequences of the contact between the poems and the reader; it is about how comes that from what individuals see, they create a concept of life which later determines their lifestyle. Therefore, it appears that as the nervous system is the place wherein impulses are developed and later transmitted to the body, the aim of the poetic mission is to foster the concrete realisation of attitudes provoked by the poetic language.

Keywords: symbols, sign, reader, concept, realization, poetic mission, poetic language

1. Introduction

The Norton Introduction to Literature reads that "poetry provides a language for feeling"¹. In *British Poetry in the Age of Modernism*, Peter Howarth puts that the social development of contemporary days has left noticeable marks upon the poetic genre². In the understanding of this author, poetry due to the scientific development, has progressed in form and meaning. In support of this view, in *The use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, Thomas Stern Eliot anticipates Howarth's comprehension as he confirms that through poems, the political and the socio-historical life can be examined³.

Truly, one can concur with Philip Arthur Larkin when he tries as hard as possible not only to analyse the social atmosphere throughout his poetry but also find means to salve traumas faced in the second half of the twentieth century.

By adopting such a position, this British poet puts in the foreground the social troubles which took place during the World Wars, and from this point on, his attention is kept on the existential quest which was manifested in the post-war period wherein many British citizens were intrigued about their material renovation.

Peter Howarth, coming to the poetic field just after the first and the second World Wars, stresses that the climate of British poetry in that time was centred on the controversy about the poetic form which is being felt till today. In fact, this critic perceives two different sides in that controversial atmosphere namely the "insiders" and the "outsiders". Explicitly, he argues that:

The insiders are the ones who write what new readers often imagine real poetry to be. They are clear, crisp and immediately comprehensible. They represent the Georgian line of narrative in verse that runs from Hardy through Betjeman and Larkin to Tony Harrison, and the other bestsellers of the present day. The outsiders are the experimenters, the chancers, those of innovative texts. They are the ones who embraced the difficult modernism of Eliot and Pound and then took poetry off to those rarefied places where, apparently, the public never bother to go.⁴

¹ Kelly J. Mays. *The Norton Introduction to Literature*. Nevada University Press, 1994, np.

² Peter Howarth. *British poetry in the Age of Modernism*. Cambridge University Press, 2005, np.

³ Thomas Stern Eliot. *The use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*. Harvard University Press, 1986, np.

⁴ Howarth, *Op. Cit.*, p1

Certainly, by qualifying Larkin as an insider, one can understand that allusions are made to the social pressure felt upon the individuals mentioned earlier. To his mind, since trials were noticeable in every aspect of social life, he chooses to depict people's living conditions in a way that can be understood as easily as possible. Thus, he uses an empirical outlook in his poems.

Throughout his lyrics, Larkin proposes an implicit solution. In fact, knowing that social pressure was noticeable at that time, he uses some literary techniques such as the metaphor and symbols to captivate the individuals' attention. In this perspective, Larkin draws people's attention upon another source of happiness in the post war society wherein everything has become a lure. When he counts their emotional lives, he demonstrates that apart from the material pleasure they run after, there exists another happiness that deserves noticeable importance.

From the above observation, the objective of this project is to prove that the poetic genre deals with any aspect of social life. Hence, the poet just have to use communication devices to stimulate social frame of mind. A better understanding of this objective requires to find appropriate answers to know how, through his communication with the reader, the poet uses object by the means of poetical devices to invite the body and how far the consequences of such communication affect the individuals' lives.

This project hints that through poems there is physical well-being. The reference to Larkin's social rescue helps understand more easily this situation. In fact, by simplifying his lyrics so as to reach the maximum of individuals, Larkin allows any individual to experiment social happiness. In the same view, he encourages people to turn away from material oppression and come back to poems because in them, one can discover another form of pleasure.

On examining this position, we presume that poetry can be seen as a salve for trouble times and a medium of comfort; it becomes clear that in poems, one may find a mental cure. In view of this fact, we feel inclined to call forth the psychoanalytical theory that to us suits the current analysis. This theory requires that we investigate the psychology of a character or an author to figure out the meaning of a text; particularly here we deal with a kind of social psychology depicted by the author.

Should we reveal that what is of paramount importance in human life are attitudes and actions manifested in individuals' lives, we can no less display that poetry is at the origin of these manifestations. Hence, the issue around which this project is centred on is how, on

the first hand, Larkin uses poetic language to foster social attitudes. In other words, this study deals with the process which starts from the context of the reception of the emotive language till the transformation of these messages into reality. On the second hand, as this process is only possible through poetry, the investigation goes through not only the “magical power” of the poetic language but also its heuristic character.

2. Larkin’s Poetic Language: A Means to Foster a New Mindset

The first concern of this project grants us with the fact that one of the abilities of the poet is to transfer his emotions to the reader. Presumably, this situation could signify that before transmitting something, he has a storehouse where one can find the elements he pretends to share. But the poet living in society, the immediate field wherein he collects the elements that he transfers come from a socio-historical context. For a better understanding of Philip Larkin’s different approaches and the behaviours he depicts throughout his poems, it is wise to set forth the socio-historical context in which his poetry has been written. However, as far as the context is concerned, there is a different comprehension by Richards:

A context is a set of entities, things or event related in a certain way; these entities have each a character such that other set of entities occur having the same characters and related by the same relation; and these occur nearly uniformly.⁵

For Richards, the context is any noticeable event that has a serious impact upon a person. Thus, the study of the context in which Philip Larkin performed his work takes into account the noticeable events that influenced his work. Indeed, when we pay heed to the four collections of poems namely: “The Less Deceived”, “the Whitsun Wedding”, “high windows”, and “collected poems”, it appears that Larkin is preoccupied by the urban life in general. In fact, this poet was born in 1922 and dead in 1985. In this posture, Larkin has witnessed the trials that took place in Great Britain during the World Wars. In the situation of this poet, as he starts his childhood before the wars without any social trouble, one can construe that he is a two-minded poet because as he grew old, he experienced another aspect of social life which was quite different from what he saw during his childhood. Clearly, having experienced life without knowing mass-killing, mass-bombing, and mass destruction,

⁵I. A. Richards & C. K. Ogden. *The Meaning of Meaning*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc. 1923, p 58

and seeing the changes that happened in the second half of the twentieth century, he started worrying about the fate of individuals. For such reasons, he kept on questioning about themes concerning death, isolation, irreverence at religion and failure in love.

Given the cultural context in which Larkin produced his work, one can understand that as just after the World Wars, Great Britain was in a desolate condition, then, any attempt intended to help the country get back its former hegemony was praised. Thus, throughout the country, crusades on activities intended to make money were organised. In this fashion, materialism became the convergent point towards which individuals were all running. Here is the focal point from which raise the preoccupations of the author. As pointed out earlier, talking about a context is to raise the influential event at a given time in the life of an author or in the life of a given person. Then, it is quite clear that a better understanding of the works of Larkin presupposes the comprehension of these events which correlate with his works. As clear as things stand now, by seeing individuals engaging themselves in material-quest is no more something misunderstood since light has been thrown on the origin of such attitude.

Recognizing that the social events play an important role because they stand as a kind of foundation upon which individuals build their life, Richards likewise goes further putting that the influences of social events correlate with the psychological life of individuals so as to reach a final objective concerning attitudes and actions. In the *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Julia Kristeva follows Richards's view. To her mind, before understanding the psychological importance of the social events, one must first understand what the "Chora" is. The Chora as she terms it in her book is first and foremost: "A modality of significance in which the linguistic sign is not yet articulated as the absence of an object and as the distinction between real and symbolic"⁶. By qualifying the Chora as something marking the difference between what is real and what is symbolic, Kristeva reveals through these lines that this process of signification goes beyond human being's comprehension. In such a position, she thinks that it is decisive since:

Its vocal and gestural organisation is subject to what we shall call an objective ordering which is dictated by natural and socio-historical constraints. We may therefore posit that social organization always already imprints its constraint

⁶ Julia Kristeva. *Revolution in Poetic Language*. Columbia University Press, 2005, p26

in a mediated form which organizes the Chora not according to a law but through an ordering.⁷

In this quotation, Kristeva supports that the "Chora" is an unseen force which impinges on individuals' decision. In fact, as it is nearly impossible to locate this force, it is consequently impossible to throw light on it.

A case in point is the wartime witnessed in the mid-twentieth century. Indeed, just after these wars, though nobody was told to do this or that, the political ideologies, namely Thatcherism in Great Britain turned towards investments. As the African saying goes, one cannot hide the sun with his hand, in response to the mass destruction that took place in the country, the leaders felt obliged to adopt investment as political leitmotiv for the well-being of the country. Therefore, some economic theories based on the re-investment like the ones of Maynard Keynes, one of the influent British economists were once more welcomed in the British social system. In this example, it is clear that though the context of war was evident, truly nobody dictated them to engage in whatever activity. The adoption of ideologies is the perfect manifestation of the Chora as an implicit force and in its position; it has effect on individuals' lives.

A practical point in case is the FIFA World cup that recently took place. In view of this celebration, Media in general could not spend an hour without showing or talking about this event. Then, those who were football fanatics were obliged to do their best in order to reach their homes and watch the different oppositions. More importantly, the event was counted and commented in nearly all the places. Here again, the Chora is being manifested since the event is imprinted in the mind of individuals against their willingness. That is the reason why Jonathan Culler justly asserts that: "A poetic text as I interpret it is not a gathering of signs on a page, but is a psychic battlefield upon which authentic forces struggle for the only victory".⁸ At this juncture, it is once more proved that the Chora is a dominant force which changes people's lives in term of attitudes without any prescribed rules.

In addition to the context which according to Richards and Julia is at the basis of some of our attitudes, some other elements play the same role. The context and the Chora depicted here perfectly fit with the objective of both Richards and Julia concerning the way they help or oblige individuals to adopt attitudes. So, in the continuation of this analysis, it is

⁷*Idem.*

⁸Jonathan Culler. *The Pursuit of Signs*. London: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2005, p 119.

important to throw light on some elements that are recurrently used by the poetic genre and subsequently reveal the “magical power” and the heuristic character of poetic language.

3. Fetishizing the Poetic Language

In Africa, as well as any other places in the world, the fetish is felt as a spirit destined to protect or heal, though some negativity connotes it. Before moving further in finding out the elements mentioned at the end of the precedent part, let's consider this understanding of poetry deriving from Richards in the following lines:

Poetry is a spirit it comes we know not whence it will not speak at our bidding nor answer in our language. It is not our servant, it is our master. Poetry is essentially and historically a connected movement, a series of successive integral manifestations. In each poet there is a voice of the movement and energy. Through the poet, poetry has become visible audible and incarnate.⁹

This quotation reveals that poetry is a multifaceted genre. From the understanding of this critic, the poetic genre is a kind of spirit. Hence, endowed with such attributes, it can manipulate without any resistance. Since no one can see it nor stop it, its progress according to Richards is "immortal". In addition to this first revelation, the author unpacks another truth through the quotation above. For Richards, as poetry can incarnate, it also means that before being able to fulfil its incarnation mission, the poet uses some abilities to reach this end. Examining what he says through the quotation, it arises that one of the poet's arms is the language.

From there on, the language which is working well in poems is an emotive one. In other words, figural language is the medium through which the poet communicates. Presumably, the communication is not direct, since it uses some other materials to reach its objective. Strangely enough, as a deeper exploration of *Metaphor*, a book by Richards puts forth: "the figurative language expresses or incite feelings and attitudes"¹⁰, one can without any doubt assert that as metaphors embody this quality it plays a vital role in this communication. Originally, Richards considers the metaphor as: “A figure of speech in which

⁹ Richards. *Op. Cit*, p148

¹⁰*Ibid*, p24

a name or descriptive term is used, is transferred to some objects different from but analogous to that to which it is properly applicable”.¹¹

Looking closely at this extract, the metaphor is given two attributes. First, it differs from what it is associated with and secondly, it is at the same time analogous to the object with which it is being associated. By bringing out the differences and also the similarities, the basic mission of the critic is to provide with understanding through it. Interestingly, these stanzas taken from “Church Going”, one of Larkin's poems¹² may help us apprehend the concept of metaphor supported here by Richards.

Church going

Once I am sure there's nothing going on
I step inside, letting the door thud shut.
Another church: matting, seats, and stone,
And little books; sprawlings of flowers, cut
For Sunday, brownish now; some brass and stuff
Up at the holy end; the small neat organ;
And a tense, musty, unignorable silence,
Brewed God knows how long. Hatless, I take off
My cycle-clips in awkward reverence,

Move forward, run my hand around the font.
From where I stand, the roof looks almost new-
Cleaned or restored? Someone would know: I don't.
Mounting the lectern, I peruse a few
Hectoring large-scale verses, and pronounce
'Here endeth' much more loudly than I'd meant.
The echoes snigger briefly. Back at the door
I sign the book, donate an Irish sixpence,

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²Philip Larkin. *Collection of Poems*. London: Classic Poetry Series, 2004.

Reflect the place was not worth stopping for. (P.L. "Church Going")¹³

Seeing the title of this poem, the first matter which comes to our mind is Christianity, obedience to God, holiness and so on. But deciphering these stanzas, two positions arise; on the one hand, a strong desire to approach the Most High, and on the other hand, a visible opposition to God. Practically, in *Metaphor: A Practical Introduction*, Zlontankovcses defends that:

A word is used metaphorically in order to achieve some artistic and rhetorical effect since we speak and write metaphorically to communicate eloquently to impress other with beautiful aesthetically pleasing words or to express some deep emotion¹⁴.

As the extract charts here, the use of metaphor goes beyond the linguistic ornament, at best, it is a way of expressing deep emotion. For this reason, Andrew Ortony in *Metaphor and Thought* has rightly added that if the use of metaphor is limited to the semantic account, it will then become too restrictive¹⁵. In other words, the understanding of the metaphor includes experiences and contexts wherein the author designs his works.

Historically, the time and the context wherein this poem has been written coincide with the one of the genocide and the mass destruction in Great Britain. No doubt, through this metaphor, the author intends to show that even if outwardly, individuals are involved in any kind of atrocities, inwardly, the inclination to religion is innate. Partly, one can keep in mind that the hypocritical attitude towards religion manifested in this poem derives from the insight that people always need favour and protection from God though they trust in their own deeds.

Truly, without rejecting this position of Zlontan, Richards moves a step further through his understanding of the situation. For the latter, the metaphor is chiefly focused on the protection of the meaning. Here, he attempts to clarify the nature and the function of the metaphor:

¹³Any reference to the corpus should be considered as presented above: Abbreviation of Philip Larkin (PL) followed by the title of the poem concerned.

¹⁴ZlontanKovecses. *Metaphor: A Practical Introduction*, Oxford University Press, 2002, p8

¹⁵Andrew Ortony. *Metaphor and Thought*. Cambridge University Press, New York, 1993, np.

Metaphor has generally followed a single line of thought based on the conviction that metaphor is essentially a rhetorical device. As a literary embellishment, metaphor adds polish and appeal to statements which assume their pure form in strictly literal language¹⁶

As the reading of this excerpt goes on, the metaphor endows several qualities. First, according to Richards it is seen as a literary embellishment, which is to say that it adds extra details to the language. In doing so, it may give more explanation for a better understanding of the message. Secondly, on the understanding of Richards it is clear that all the ideas cannot be expressed through the literal language, then the use of metaphors "express ideas that cannot be restated in plain language without a loss of meaning"¹⁷. It is then clear that the metaphor protects the meaning.

Knowing from above that through the metaphor, the essence of the message is secured, it then becomes according to Richards's term "a peremptory invitation to discovery"¹⁸. In other terms, when through the metaphor the message remains original and natural, it can be considered as a guide for individuals. Andrew Ortony shares this view in the following lines:

This metaphor for communication in natural language is based on the idea that language is a carrier of ideas, thoughts, aspirations, and so on, so that all a hearer needs to do is to unpack the message and take out what was in it¹⁹

Once again, it appears that the metaphor protects the message since before grasping or comprehending the message, the hearer needs just to dissect the metaphor so as to reach his end. Though Richards shares this understanding of things, he rather supports that in this position, the metaphor becomes a heuristic value. Naturally, when he says that the metaphor endows a heuristic value, he wants to show that through the metaphor, individuals are being aware of things or they are understanding things by themselves. With such quality, he continues by asserting that the metaphor reorders individuals' lives. This being the case, an investigation will be led in "Best Society", one of Larkin's poems, so as to see how metaphor

¹⁶I. A. Richards. *Metaphor. Op. Cit.*, p 10

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸*Ibid.* p45

¹⁹Ortony, *Op. Cit.*, n p.

helps reconsider a situation and adopt a new style of life. Let's go through the following stanzas:

When I was a child, i thought,
Casually, that solitude
Never needed to be sought.
Something everybody had,
Like nakedness, it lay at hand,
Not specially right, not specially wrong
A plentiful and obvious thing
Not at all hard to understand.

Then after twenty, it became
At once more difficult to get
And more desired-though all the same
More undesirable, for what
You are alone has to achieve
The rank of fact, to be expressed
In terms of others, or it is just
A compensating make-believe.

Much better stay in company!
To love you must have someone else,
Giving requires a legatee
Good neighbours need whole parishful
Of folk to do it on-in short, our virtues are all social; if
Deprived of solitude, you chafe
It's clear you're not the virtuous sort. (P.L. "Best Society")

As a matter of fact, the objective of this poet is to describe or talk about the best society one can meet in this world. But, by the use of lines such as "much better stay in a company" in line 1 stanza 3, Larkin depicts the contrary of what must be found in a good society. By recalling the conditions of life in which the author was when writing this poem, he

helps the reader understand more or less easily his description. In fact, when writing this poem, the author was facing multiple trials in the British society. Then, by describing the difficulties in the so-called best society, he invites individuals to realize that whatever difficult the situation can be in a society, this society remains a "Good one". This analogy drawn here by this poet implies that in addition to any kind of happiness one may find in the social system, one may on the other side understand that, in the social atmosphere, there reside unhappiness, loneliness and any kind of trial. Based on this comprehension, individuals may better apprehend with realism the so-called "Best Society" alluded to by Philip Larkin.

From the argumentation above, it clearly arises that through the metaphor, individuals are being aware of things by themselves, then, considering the metaphor as a torch throwing light upon their life, it helps them build their life.

Yet, considering only the position of the metaphor may not be satisfactory. We need to move further when relating the mental contact and the actual world. In *The Pursuit of Sign*, Jonathan Culler defends that: "Human reality cannot be described as a set of physical event and in focusing on social facts which are always of a symbolic order (...)individual's experience is made possible by the symbolic systems".²⁰

In this passage, Jonathan shows that the sole condition of understanding the social system depends on the comprehension of the symbolic order of things as stated in the quotation. By this, the symbols have the same mission as the metaphors.

It becomes then necessary to enter the symbolic systems to discover whether, both metaphor and symbol play the same role. In effect, according to Jonathan a true symbol is: "One which correctly records an adequate reference. It is usually seen as set of words in the form of a proposition or sentence"²¹. Considering this fragment, we have to understand what the "word" and the "reference" are in order to define the symbols. Interestingly, Richards and Ogden propose something in this perspective, in their conception of things: "He who shall dully consider these matters will find that there is a certain bewitchery or fascination in words which make them operate with a force beyond what we can naturally give account."²²

It is evident from the above definition that there is a certain power in words. They compare the power of words to the one of a fetish, which justifies their fascination.

²⁰ Jonathan Culler *Op.Cit.*, p 29

²¹*Ibid.* p102

²²I. A. Richards, C. K. Ogden. *Op.Cit.*, p24

In addition to the words, a better understanding of the symbol also implies the deciphering of the reference. So, a brief explanation of the reference may improve our understanding of the symbols. According to Richards: "A reference is a set of external and psychological contexts linking a mental process to a referent"²³. In other terms, talking about a reference involves the union of external and the psychological contexts on the one hand and on the other hand; it implies the connection of these contexts to the mind through a referent. Actually, a reference can be defined as the road which guides the mind towards the referent.

We can then keep in mind that the elements being part of the symbols are not only endowed with spiritual power but also, they foster the contact between the world and the mind. As underlined so far, the reference creates the contact between the mind and the social world, but in effect, this acquaintance remains superficial since it is limited to the referent, meaning to the linguistic sign. Clearly, this relation remains a psychological one. That is the reason why Richards proposes that:

Since we are not able to observe references, directly we have to study them through signs either through accompanying feelings or through symbols. Feelings are plainly insufficient and symbols afford a far more sensitive indication.²⁴

Following this explanation from Richards, it appears that symbols provide with means through which it becomes easier to recognize something. For this typical reason, Richards concludes that "symbols symbolise an act of reference".²⁵ Hence, the symbol produce acts in individuals.

One can keep in mind that the language used in poems is purely based on signs. But, as strange as it appears, from this subjective position reinforced by the fascination of poetic language, it becomes a pure reality in individuals' lives.

²³*Ibid.* p90

²⁴*Ibid.*, p 206

²⁵*Ibid.*, p105

4. Conclusion

In “Unnoticed in the Casual Light of the Day”: *Philip Larkin and the Plain Style*, Tijana S. reveals that: “The poet is the man next door”.²⁶ In the mind of this literary critic, the poet is like a person who secretly witnesses an event. As such, he holds an important social position in the sense that he is able to tell what he sees truthfully or not. The poet seen as a witness is obliged to give an account for the social facts based not on his own will, but mostly centred on what the Chora communicates him.

In the intuition of Philip Larkin, if there is a fusion of the individuals’ lives and their social realities just after the World Wars, it is evident that they will be more and more traumatised. Therefore, he estimates that something can be done to spare the individuals’ lives. It then becomes clear in his mind that the poetic genre he has opted for is able to excite feelings in the individuals.

Richards clarifies that the medium used by the writers to reach their final end is language. Consequently, if someone knows what the language is and the means it uses, it will be easier to understand the mission of the writer. Concretely, Richards and C. K. Ogden recognise that there are three factors when any statement is made or interpreted: the mental process, the symbol and the referent. They conclude that the language, particularly the poetic language is a set of external and psychological contexts linking the mind and the referent.

At last, it appears through Larkin’s poems that by the religious values, clarity of language and symbolism, the individuals become free from their mental burdens.

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²⁶TijanaStojkovic. “Unnoticed in the Casual Light of the Day”: *Philip Larkin and the Plain Style*. London: Routledge, 2006, np.

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