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A Study on "The Movement"

By

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THE Movement, a term which is dubbed on the poetic trend in modern Britain, is still obscure in its content. Mysterious, because it appears to have no concrete notion of poetic homogeneity, nor is there any consensus as to any specific literary principles. This essay tentatively examines the significance of the Movement, focusing in particular on two poets and their poetic style. Philip Larkin, deceased librarian-poet, and Thom Gunn, recent poet laureate. They are considered to be at the center of the literary fashion. Since each poet's world consists of multiple poetic subjects, what follows will pick out and discuss a few of their major features respectively.

I.

Probably best known as the editor of *The Oxford Book of Twentieth-century English Verse* (1973), Philip Larkin, one of the representative modern English poets, died in December 1985 at

the age of sixty-three. His reputation as a poet was high, as Peter Levi, professor of poetry at Oxford, says the "Philip was the greatest poet alive in English" (*Time* December 16, 1985). With two novels, a collection of essays, and four volumes of poetry, Larkin was not apparently prolific. At the death of Sir John Betjeman in 1984, he was considered to succeed the position of poet laureate; yet Ted Hughes got the post. Scarce though his work is, Larkin's poetic work undoubtedly belongs to the first-class with a brilliant touch of humor, wit, and decorum. This essay will therefore examine, among his numerous poetic features, his sense of love, which appears as ironical and central in his poetic world.

Larkin's aspects of love are clearly described in his four collections of poems: *The North Ship* (1945), *The Less Deceived* (1955), *The Whitsun Wedding* (1964), and *High Windows* (1974) (hereafter abbreviated as *NS, LD, WW,* and *HW*)? How does he treat lovers and what is the significance of love for him? When his poetic nature is often characterized by passiveness and intactness, how does he deal with demanding love? Do his personae believe the eternity of love in a romantic way, or is there, what one may call, the suffering of love?

In Larkin's poetry the religious conflicts between carnal and spiritual love (or between earthly and heavenly love) as seen, for instance, in Christina Rossetti's works is hardly seen. He has a number of poems which reveal the matters of sex, yet they display nothing like carnal love as a central theme.

The motifs often used as to love are marriage, separation, and the lack of communication. In general, Larkin treats love as the cause of illusions and as the agent of deception. Love seems feeble and ephemeral, and it is fragile because of man's and woman's frailty. With the process of time it often fades into oblivion, though it also lurks as something positively longed for. Stating that "what love is present in his poems it is something either hopelessly longed for . . . or cynically dismissed as just another evasion of reality," P. R. King regards love in Larkin's poetry as fundamentally illusory.[1] Actually, Larkin treats love as something like dream, hope, and

ideal, which are too elusive for man to perfect. As a whole, his poetry briefly shows five aspects of love: the negation of the absoluteness of love, the sterility of love, the affirmation of love, the passiveness towards love, and the memory of love pertinent to the past. In the following discussion each aspect will be examined, and this essay will consider the total import of his thought of love.

First, the negation of the absoluteness of love: this means that there is no such thing as absolute love. Larkin says that since love can die, it is not eternal and that man's wish for love to be absolute seems to be merely a dream:

> . . . What lips said
> Starset and cockcrow call the dispossessed
> On to the next desert, lest
> Love sink a grave round the still-sleeping head?
>
> (*NS*; XXII)

Man has an ideal conception of love and seeks to perpetuate it, believing in its eternity; but love torments one who is already dispossessed by love. As "No Road" shows love subject to "all time's eroding agents," there is no perpetuity of love. In "Dawn" and "VII" (both in *NS*) the poet as a persona realizes his "heart to be loveless," which reveals his change to detach himself from a love-entangled world into a solipsistic isolation: "Here, where no love is, / All that was hopeless / And kept me from sleeping / Is frail and unsure." His desire to liberate himself from the troubles which love causes is a sort of escapism, as his world is characterized by "silence, and space, and strangers" (*LD*; "No Road"). Larkin is an escapist asto love, because it is often frail and distressing.

"Love Songs in Age" (*WW*) unveils a woman's illusion and sorrow about love. She expected love to be absolute in creating happiness and mutual understanding, but nothing turned out as she had hoped. Love songs conjure up the memory of her youth, "Word after sprawlong hyphenated word"; and at the same time they make her realize the weight of the past and the difference of

the present from the past, which can never be retrieved:

> The glare of that much-mentioned brilliance, love,
> Broke out, to show
> Its bright incipience sailing above,
> Still promising to solve, and satisfy,
> And set unchangeably in order. So
> To pile them back, to cry,
> Was hard, without lamely admitting how
> It had not done so then, and could not now.

Life does not always conform to one's ideal and dream, nor is love necessarily absolute in fulfilling them. "Sailing above," love allures her as it used to do, but at the same moment it lies so far beyond her reach that it only maker her forlorn and sad. Love seemed to promise much, and she believed it; but life had disillusioned her, dispersing her romantic fancy. Lost and nostalgic towards a happy time of love, she is further distressed.

"Faith Healing" (*WW*) also discloses the unfulfilled dreams of love. Love is a great subject in life, but to attain perfect love, if any, is difficult:

> In everyone there sleeps
> A sense of life lived according to love.
> To some it means the difference they could make
> By loving others, but across most it sweeps
> As all they might have done had they been loved.

Man thinks that love is supreme and that it would help change his life; yet often he senses that the unfulfillment of love scars his mind. Larkin implies that love creates an irony of life which but for love he would not meaningfully taste.

The next aspect of love is sterility. Larkin suggests that love can often be sterile. In "XVI" (*NS*), life is static, routinized and regularized. Love, just life the routines of quotidian life, can only suggest the sterility of modern world:

The bottle is drunk out by one;
At two, the book is shut;
At three, the lovers life apart,
Love and its commerce done;

Routines deprives man of the vigor of life and love; what is needed is to escape from numbness. In a wasteland where everything is mechanically viewed, love can easily die: "Measuring love and money / Ways of slow dying" (*WW*; "Nothing to Be Said"). As Antony says, "There's beggary in the love that can be reckon'd" (*Antony and Cleopatra*), measured love is doomed to die. In "If, My Daring" (*LD*) the speaker describes in a humorous way the condition of no love. His darling does not perceive that his love is already dead, so she, like Lewis Carroll's Alice, is imagined to jump into his head; there she discovers that he has no love: then, "Delusions that shrink to the size of a woman's glove / Then sicken inclusively outwards." Feeling "an adhesive sense of betrayal," she is at last dismayed to hear in him "how the past is past and the future neuter." Though this poem does not directly treat the sterility of love, it is unique and interesting in its humorous handling of lovelessness as a theme.

The next subject is the affirmation of love. "XXVIII" (*NS*) displays a speaker's exaltation of love. "Is it for now or always ?", he asks and wonders if his joy of love is a trick:

Is it a mirage or miracle,
Your lips that lift at mine ?
And the suns like a juggler's juggling-balls,
Are they a sham or a sign ?

The poem reveals the speaker's wonder and delight, and towards the end of the poem the eternity of love is strongly affirmed:

Shine out, my sudden angel,
Break fear with breast and brow,
I take you now and for always,

For always is always now.

Also the title poem "Wedding-Wind" portrays the exaltation of love and happiness, describing the candid monologue of a new happy bride: "I was sad / That any man or beast that night should lack / The happiness I had." But the next morning, under the sun, she sees a different reality of life. The changes off the landscape caused by the storm and the flood are enormous, and she wonders if her love and happiness would be safe and last ever without any change. Finally, however, in an affirmative tone she thinks:

> Shall I be let to sleep
> Now this perpetual morning shares my bed ?
> Can even death dry up
> These new delighted lakes, conclude
> Our kneeling as cattle by all-generous waters ?

In the prime of happiness and love she identifies her life with the dynamic energy of nature, which is often turbulent. As if overcome by the overflowing water of passion, she hopes that her happiness likewise would override the stark reality of life and that her love would continue to be the fountain of perpetual happiness.

The identification of the frenzy of love with the staggering force of nature is a rare poetic work for Larkin. Very often, probably because of his propensity for solitude and detachment, Larkin's treatment of love is ordinarily not intense. It is true that love is one of the important subjects he pursues in his poetry, especially in his earlier career; yet compared with his skeptical poems, the number of his love poems is admittedly small. Larkin's stance is often to observe love rather than to involve himself in love. He is not so much an actor as an observant. What concerns him most is to see the truth of love and strip love of illusions. And when this occurs, his poem reveals an extraordinarily shining moment of truth.

Larkin is by nature passive and skeptical. Skeptical to love, he describes the separation of lovers, and man longs for freedom, a space to breathe: "never were hearts more eager to be free" (XXIV).

"Waving part and waving drop from sight," he wishes to efface himself entirely, even his memory. In "Places, Loved Ones" a speaker desires to be along, but he also thinks that he would not be freed even if he kept his solitude: the reality of life would intrude and impose upon him the responsibilities for the world. Larkin suggests that he tends to detain himself from love, because love is at once illusory and demanding. It often violates his solitude and brings him to the troubles of life. His passiveness is stubborn and cynical, and what lies beneath it is his wish for oblivion: "Beyond all this, the wish to be alone. / Beneath it all, desire of oblivion runs" (*LD*; "Wants"). Merle E. Brown explains the reclusive traits of Larkin's poetry as follows: "The condition of oblivious aloneness is, to be sure, a delicate one, is indeed, as an aspect of that aloof, dismissive attentiveness which is the inner value of all Larkin's poetry."[2] One may be able to see Larkin's passiveness as a sort of poetic freedom, a freedom gained by a detached view of life.

Finally, Larkin's treatment of love in relations with the past need be examined. Briefly, for him, the past has little relevance to the present. In his poetry the memory of love often leads to sadness, unfulfillment, and illusions. In "An Arundel Tomb" (*WW*), for instance, the past seems significant as if almost symbolizing the fact of love, yet the past is also illusory and can be distorted with human egoistic perceptions. The ancient stone reliefs of the earl and countess have survived the incredible length of time, and they seem to stand for love to modern viewers; yet the poet wonders if it is truly love that they represent:

> Time has transfigured them into
> Untruth. The stone fidelity
> They hardly meant has come to be
> Their final lazon, and to prove
> Our almost-instinct almost true:
> What will survive of us is love.

As in a magic, time tricks man's perception, and the past is often

romanticized. The last line is ironical in suggesting man's ceaseless romantic tendency about love. Larkin implies that love can live, in the most exact sense, only in the present and that man must be careful not to distort the truth of the illusive past. In a letter to Charles Monteith, Larkin writes that "it now seems to me to be a very delicate balance between what has happened and what one like to think of as happening. . . ."[3] What is important for Larkin is that he sees the truth hidden behind the illusion of the past.

Thus, Larkin's treatment of love is multivalent. Love seems almost suppressed by the poet's aloofness, solitude, and skepticism. Larkin seems more interested in the irony of love rather than in the joy of love. It may be appropriate to conclude that he is passive towards love, as he senses its weak points: love is illusory, ephemeral, and demanding. Desisting positive interactions through love, he seems to have passed intactly through the cream of life. Can a poet, however, become a great poet with such a passive attitude towards life ? One must read him and find an answer by himself.

II. Thom Gunn

Often associated with the group of the Movement including Ted Hughes and Philip Larkin, Thom Gunn has been acclaimed as one of the best contemporary English poets. His first verse, *Poems*, came out in 1953 while he was an undergraduate at Cambridge. His second collection, *Fighting Terms* (1954, revised 1958), earned him the Levinson Prize. *The Sense of Movement* (1957) brought him the Somerset Maugham Award, and he has since published *My Sad Captains* (1961), *Positives* and *Touch* (1967), *The Garden of the Gods* (1968), *Sunlight* and *Poems 1950–1966: A Selection* (1969), *Moly* (1971), *Jack Straw's Castle* (1976), and others.

What follows will trace chronologically Gunn's works and examine the development of his poetical vision. For this purpose, six poems will be investigated: "Wind in the Street" from *Fighting Terms*, "On

the Move" from The Sense of Movement, "A Map of the City" from *My Sad Captains*, "Misanthropes" from *Touch*, "Sunlight" from *Moly*, and "The Cherry Tree" from *Jack Straw's Castle*.

As P. R. King says, "Gunn's poetry is the account of an existential quest," his verse mainly deals with man's search for his identity.[1] "Wind in the Street" is such an example. In each stanza the first and last lines are almost identical, suggesting a cyclic movement of life. First, a speaker enters "the talking shop," where "the assistant / Points to the old cogwheels, the old handles / Set in machines." This description conjures up the imagery of a mechanized life. At the shop he would buy "the same faces, and then the same scandals," which implies his routine life. In the second stanza, climbing to a square attic, he gasps at discovering something new: "So square, so simple. It is new to be so simple." Momentarily he is struck by the appearance of the simplicity of life, into which he is inclined to involve himself. To him the sky is "the same artificial toylike blue," and his life seems likewise artificial. The "same stairs led to the same attic," and he is almost submerged in the same inert life he has known; yet with an excuse that he only came to look around, he regains the street. The reason for his withdrawal is not clear; it may be simply because he did not find what he wanted, or because he was baffled by the artificiality of life—a sharp sense of the lack of his identity.

In the last stanza, the speaker reveals his thought based upon his free will:

> I may return, meanwhile I'll look elsewhere:
> My want may modify to what I have seen.
> So I smile wearily, though even as I smile
> A purposeful gust of wind tugs at my hair;
> But I turn, I wave, I am not sure what I mean.
> I may return, meanwhile I'll look elsewhere.

The speaker here, though still seemingly attached to his familiar world, shows a sign of withdrawal from it. His withdrawal implies

a choice of will, but he is not very definite about his decision, because he thinks that his need may change the familiar world; in other words, his withdrawal is indecisive, because he reveals the possibility of his return. What is sure is that he has stepped out from the routine and familiar reality of his world and is about to explore other worlds. He does not know what he will discover. His journey may end up in despair, or old familiar reality may crop up. In all, his withdrawal and departure may not be called a quest for identity, because in no sense he withdraws positively; at least, however, one must notice that he discloses the freedom of will.

"On the Move" describes more vividly the same themes, the freedom of man's will and his search for identity. The first stanza shows the movements of birds and the imminence of "an uncertain violence." Something is raging "under the dust thrown by a baffled sense / Or the dull thunder of approximate words." The second stanza describes what is happening: "On motorcycles, up the road, they come." At first, the motorcyclists appear like "flies" in the distance, and soon their features come into full scope:

> In goggles, donned impersonality,
> In gleaming jackets trophied with the dust,
> They strap in doubt—by hiding it, robust—
> And almost hear a meaning in their noise.

Gunn's speaker implies that the motorcyclists have no individuality, because they look alike and their identities are obscure. They seem fearless, but they always have a fear of lack of identity: "their hardiness / Has no shape yet." With the will which "they imperfectly control / To dare a future from the taken routes," they are searching for something meaningful or trying to become something or somebody.

A line in the fourth stanza, "it is a part solution, after all," signifies an ineluctable aspect of human condition: man always tries to satisfy his need, perpetually chasing after the shadow of his identity, "always toward, toward." The last stanza shows that

the motorcyclists are in constant motion, stimulated by their sheer will and energy ("the self-defined, astride the created will"), but they find no absolute destination:

> At worst, one is in motion; and at best,
> Reaching no absolute, in which to rest,
> One is always nearer by not keeping still.

As stasis is a form of death, they must always be on the move; yet they never reach the absolute figure of their identity.

What Gunn communicates in this poem is man's existential situation in search of his identity. With sheer will man struggles to attain his identity, but his effort continues as long as there is no absolute destination except death. Compared with "Wind in the Street," this poem describes man's quest for identity more clearly.

"A Map of the City" reveals intricate life in the chaotic modern world. The speaker "I" stands on a hill, watches a luminous city, and feels the city full of human potentialities: "Move the potential, the gray shapes." However, as the city discloses its energy, it also shows its malady. Like Carl Sandburg's "Chicago," "A Map of the City" shows a city as an assemblage and symbol of various forms of modern human life. The speaker regards the chaotic and vigorous life of the city as a sort of potentiality, into which he is willing to involve himself. In contrast with "Wind in the Street" and "On the Move," this poem displays Gunn's growing social concern and his wider poetical vision.

Consisting of a series of seventeen poems, "Misanthropes" is, as a whole, a kind of dramatized poetry. Its central theme concerns man's identity, freedom, and dignity. The first division, "The Last Man" (I–V), describes a man living like a hermit or social outcast. He lacks motion, and his senses seem numb; but soon he feels that his mind may not rest unless he chooses to do something even if it may end up in a failure and make him disgusted. He has formed a sort of inhumanness, yet as "a courier after identity" he begins to move and make a pattern in his disarrayed world. His repetitive

tread has hardened the mountain paths, the territory of his world, which is nevertheless limited and within which he can stay free. He explores near the margin of his territory, constantly returning to the center "like a discovering system"; this feedback suggests an existential life.

The second division, "Memoirs of the World" (VI–XI), deals with a problem concerning a man's reconstruction of his world. VI displays the present situation of the man, who recalls his past with bitterness. In VII he thinks that his life was "presence without full / being." VIII describes him in the present situation of the world:

> I search for meaning, studying to remember
> What the world was, and meant. Therefore I try
> To reconstruct it in a dying ember,
> And wonder, does fire make it life or die ?

Acknowledging the presence of evil in the wasteland-like world, he thinks of "a man who burst from sympathy alone," which refers to Christ at the time of his reconstruction of the world. IX again shows the man in the past trying to become "an untirable giver" and "a trencher / of human flesh." In X he feels empty, missing "enfolding, possessing, merging love," while he regards it as "a devil" or "life's parody," for it "enthralls a universe with its rich / heavy passion"; however, he still feels, mysterious as the meaning of the universe is, that something about man is worth retaining. XI discloses this "something" with an episode of a German soldier who helped the escapade of Jews: "he did not submit / To the blackmail of his circumstances." The soldier showed human dignity and the freedom of will:

> I see him in the Polish snow
> His muddy wrapping small protection,
> Breathing the cold air of his freedom
> And treading a distinct direction.

The soldier persisted in humanitarian belief with his adamant will,

and his choice marks distinction.

The third division, "Elegy on the Dust" (XII), uses the image of the perpetually moving dust on earth. The dust refers to human beings, "the world's refuse and debris." Also the sea appears as a graveyard, the "universal knacker's yard," which, unlike the regenerative power of the sea in William C. Williams' "Paterson," promises no such force. As dust, man is "hurled / In endless hurry round the world," perpetually searching for his identity:

> Each colorless hard grain is now distinct,
> In no way to its neighbor linked,
> Yet from wind's unpremeditated labors
> It drifts in concord with its neighbors,
> Perfect community in its behavior.
> It yields to what is sought, a savior:

The last division "The First Man" (XIII–XVII), exhibits a man's meeting with other people. As a "rudimentary man" he has lost much of his humanness living alone; yet he notices the presence of other people and is discovered: "He is surveyed and he himself is changed, / Bombarded by perceptions, rearranged." No longer keeping his solitude, he decides to return to a human society, with a new perception of the world: "The dust yet to be shared."

On the whole, "Misanthropes," ironical as the title may be, is an examination of a human world; the poem displays such fundamental, shining moments of human values as dignity, freedom, and love, and Gunn perceives them as often inclined to be stifled in the chaos of human world.

A number of poems in *Moly* unveil Gunn's novel poetical dimensions—the use of transformation as seen in "Moly" that "parrot, moth, shark, wolf, crocodile, ass, flea. / What germs, what jostling mobs there were in me"; or in "Rites of Passage" the speaker changes into an animal with horns and hooves. Why Gunn evolved into this dimension may be answered this way: in his earlier poems he depicted man's potential search for the meaning of life or identity, yet man is

always confined by natural limits; under these circumstances, the use of transformation becomes a handy tool to explore another poetical dimension.

In "Sunlight" the instance of transformation is not particularly obvious, but it lurks in the speaker's longing to be altered into "petals of light." He has an image, a desire to become like the sun, which is his model because it has the power of re-creation, but he knows that his idealism does not meet with reality: "the image of persistence / Is an image, only, of our own desires / Desires and knowledge touch without relating." He considers that "the system of which sun and we are part / Is both imperfect and deteriorating," which means that the affinity between the sun and human beings is now subtle and worsening, because people no longer aspire for the "original perfection" of their creator (the sun) and are not more subject to it than "water, glass, metal, match light in their raptures, / Flashing their many answers to the one." Compared with man's indifference, the sun is patient and kind: "And yet the sun outlasts us at the heart." The last two stanzas reveal the speaker's hymn-like paean to the sun:

> Great seedbed, yellow center of the flower,
> Flower on its own without a root or stem,
> Giving all color and all shape their power,
> Still re-creating in defining them,
>
> Enable us, altering like you, to enter
> Your passionless love, impartial but intense,
> And kindle in acceptance round your center,
> Petals of light lost in your innocence.

The sun is the nurturer of all seeds, always giving light to everything on earth. The speaker prays that the sun would share its fair love with human beings, so that in return they could light the dark corners of the world. Metaphorically, of course, "petals of light" means the inner light (love and kindness) of men,[2] and the whole

poem expresses the necessity of human communication, love, and humbleness. Compared with the four poems discussed above, this poem shows a real culmination. The speaker's desire to identify himself with the absolute may seem exaggerated, but his overreaching longing leads to the theme of universal truths. From an individual problem to a universal one the poet's vision clearly expands.

The last poem to be examined is "The Cherry Tree." This poem reveals Gunn's definite idea of the problem of human identity in the world. A cherry tree is described as a metaphor of woman, and its burgeoning bud is analogous to a woman's childbirth. The tree repeats the process of creating something out of nothing; it is close to the growth of woman:

> birds get them, men
> pick them, human children wear them
> in pairs over their ears
>
> she loses them all.
> That's why she made them,
> to lose them into the world, she
> returns to herself,
> she rests, she doesn't care.

What is important to the tree is to satisfy its natural need, which is to repeat its seasonal childbirth. The tree shows self-contained satisfaction, independence, and resolution; it stands with dignity "as black and hard as lava." Symbolizing individuality, freedom, and pride, the tree continues to keep its definite and unconquerable posture. Like the tree, man's life repeats re-creation from birth to death. The human world is chaotic, yet it is hoped that man will keep his solid center.

In sum, what can be seen from the examination of these six poems is this: in "Wind in the Street" man's stance in the world is not clear; he moves around to find something meaningful, but he is not necessarily sure what he should do. In "On the Move" Gunn portrays the situation of man's quest for identity; man's problem

is existential. "Misanthropes" also depicts man's existential quest for identity in a dramatized story; from a solitary existence a man discovers some important human values which urge him to commit himself to a society. The commitment is also the theme of "A Map of the City." "Sunlight" culminates man's quest for identity; it displays a desire, a sort of idealism to overcome human limitation for the purpose of unifying mankind. Finally, "The Cherry Tree" deals again with the situation of individuals concerning such values as self-sufficiency and dignity. In the earlier poems Gunn explores human situations to see what can be within the capacity of man. Ultimately, he reaches the possibility of man and the fulfillment of his life sustained with dignity and freedom.

Notes

I.

[1] P. R. King, *Nine Contemporary Poets: A Critical Introduction* (N. Y.: Methuen, 1979) 22.

[2] Merle E. Brown, *Double Lyric* (N. Y.: Columbia UP, 1980) 83.

[3] Charles Monteith, "Publishing Larkin," *Larkin at Sixty,* ed. Antony Thwaite (London: Faber and Faber, 1982) 39–40.

II.

[1] King 106.

[2] Jay Pariri makes a serious mistake in saying that "he ends by hymning the sunflower, the 'yellow centre of the flower' which inherits the light, transforms color and shape. . . . Of the flower, he asks. . . . " Apparently, the poem shows no sunflower, as is evident from the following lines: "Flower on its own, without a root or stem." Jay Pariri, "Rule and Energy: The Poetry of Thom Gunn," *The Massachusetts Review* (Spring 1983) 148.

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