International Journal of Language Academy
ISSN: 2342-0251
DOI Number: http://dx.doi.org/10.18033/ijla.299

Volume 3/4 Winter
2015 p. 471/480

Article History:
Received
29.10.2015
Received in revised form
17.11.2015
Accepted
28.11.2015
Available online
15.12.2015

THE MOVEMENT AND THE POETRY OF PHILIP LARKIN

The Movement ve Philip Larkin Şiiri

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Abstract

Literary periods and groups have provided the literary historian with a practical instrument to divide and subdivide the great history of literature into more manageable and comprehensible units. Yet, literary periods and groups may also entail certain problems, particularly about group identity. The Movement, which, from its uncertain beginnings in the 1950s, has come to define a prolific era of English poetry, is one of such problematic groupings. Contrary to what its name suggests, the Movement does not refer to a coherent group of poets with a clear manifesto, or artistic programme, but to a trend in poetry that emerged in the cultural climate of post-war England. Therefore, critical studies on the Movement poetry should not focus on the question of group identity, whose existence is highly dubious, but should rather be committed to theoretical discussions on the works of major poets of the 1950s. In other words, the ethos of the Movement can only be found in the works of the poets associated with it. Accordingly, this article aims to establish the theoretical frame of the Movement poetry through a discussion of Philip Larkin's poems, interviews and private writings.

Key Words: *The Movement, Philip Larkin, English poetry.*

Özet

Edebi akım ve topluluk isimleri edebiyat tarihini somut dönemler halinde ele almamızı sağlamalarının yanı sıra, bir dizi sorunu da beraberinde getirir. Bir akımın ya da topluluğun nerede, ne zaman ve kimler tarafından başlatıldığı, ortak sanatsal ilkelerinin ve öne çıkan temsilcilerinin kimler olduğu gibi birçok sorun edebiyat tarihçilerini meşgul etmiştir. 1950'lerin başında ortaya çıkan ve İngiliz şiirinin en üretken dönemlerinden biriyle özdeşleşen "the Movement" akımı da benzer bir tartışmanın başlamasına neden olmuştur. Çeşitli derlemelerde ve akademik çalışmalarda sıklıkla kullanılan "the Movement" terimi, Kingsley Amis'ten Philip Larkin'e kadar uzanan birçok ünlü ozanı bir arada düşünmemizi sağlamıştır. Ancak, herhangi bir estetik manifestoya ya da programa sahip olamayan "the Movement," ortak sanat anlayışı etrafında birleşmiş bir topluluğun adı değil; İngiltere'nin savaş sonrası kültürel ikliminde filizlenen yeni şiir anlayışının bir ifadesidir. Adı "the Movement" akımıyla birlikte anılan bazı önemli ozanların da bu akımla herhangi bir bağlarının bulunmadığını iddia etmesi de, konuyla ilgili tartışmaların daha da karmaşıklaşmasına neden olmuştur. Bu nedenle 1950 şiiri üzerine yapılan çalışmalar, grup temsiliyeti tartışmaları bağlamından çıkartılarak, "the Movement" teriminde ifade bulan şiir anlayışının ortak özellikleri üzerine odaklanmalıdır. Bir başka deyişle, "the Movement" akımının kuramsal boşluğu ancak bu akımla ilişkilendirilen ozanların sanatsal yaklaşımlarının incelenmesiyle doldurulabilir. Bu anlayıştan yola çıkan çalışmanın amacı "the Movement" akımının kuramsal çerçevesini Philip Larkin'in şiirleri, mülakatları ve şahsi mektupları üzerinden ortaya koymaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *The Movement, Philip Larkin, İngiliz şiiri.*

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Introduction

Angry Young Man Movement and the Movement were the twin insurgencies that dominated the literary scene of England in the 1950s. While the former is generally associated with the works of drama and fiction, the latter refers to a mode of writing shared by a group of poets, including Kingsley Amis, Robert Conquest, D. J. Enright, Thom Gunn, John Holloway, Elizabeth Jennings, John Wain and Philip Larkin (Swarbrick, 1995: 69). The Movement and particularly Philip Larkin's poetry continues to attract considerable attention from scholars and students of literature, though he once said in an interview almost threateningly, "I should hate anybody to read my work because he's been told to, and told to what to think about it" (Larkin, 1983: 56).[2] Larkin's resentment against those who try to interpret his poems does not, however, stem from his reserved character, but from his firm belief in the clarity of meaning in his works. In the same interview, he asserts, "I think in one sense I'm like Evelyn Waugh or John Betjeman, in that there is not much to say about my work. When you've read a poem, that is it, it's all quite clear what it means" (Larkin, 1983*:* 53-54). Despite his self-deprecating disclaimer, one still needs to be familiar with certain facts about Larkin's life in order to appreciate his poetry. In fact, biographical information becomes almost a prerequisite for a thorough understanding of Larkin's poetry, which Andrew Swarbrick regards as, "[t]he most public revelations of Larkin's self-protecting privacy" (Swarbrick, 1995: 1). Retrospection and self-portrayal characterise many of his well-known poems. Perhaps that is why Larkin's private life and writings have always been of great interest to his readers. His biographies started to appear while he was still alive. It seems that Larkin has lost nothing from his popularity after his death, either. On the contrary, he became what he feared most: a public figure. Coventry, his hometown, became an open air Larkin Museum with 26 key sites, including his house, his school and even his local pub.[3] His life story has been adapted into films and stage performances. While BBC broadcast a documentary of Philip Larkin's life in 2003, titled Philip Larkin: *Love and Death in Hull*, Sir Tom Courtenay devised a one-man show based on his writings, namely *Pretending to be Me*. The life and career of this idiosyncratic poet is also important in defining the characteristics of an exciting, yet curiously dubious trend in English poetry, which came to be referred to as the Movement. As it did not start as a proper literary group with a specific manifesto, or artistic programme, critical discussions on the Movement necessarily entails revisiting the life and works of the poets associated with it. Accordingly, this paper aims to establish the theoretical frame of the Movement poetry through a discussion of Philip Larkin's poems, interviews and private writings.

Questioning the Movement

Any discussion of the Movement should inevitably start with a consideration of the polemics regarding its existence and validity as a literary group. The Movement, like some other schools of poetry, literary movements or isms, started with an identity crisis mainly because it was not a coherent group with a manifesto of its own, but rather a group that "[…] shared a set of values and assumptions closely related to the moods and conditions of post-war England" (Regan, 1992: 14). Some prominent literary critics of the period, such as Ian Hamilton and John Press, even doubted the existence of the Movement as an influential literary movement and regarded it as a short-lived commercial craze that owed

[2] From an interview with Philip Larkin by Miriam Gross from *The Observer*, 1979.
[3] The tour called "Larkin Trail" aims to help the poet' fans to follow his footsteps around Hull. http://www.thelarkintrail.co.uk

its popularity to publicity machine (Corcoran, 1993: 81). But, there were also some other critics who recognised the changing face of the English society in the post-war era and the birth of a new literary trend in poetry that came along with it. For instance, Anthony Hartley wrote as early as 1954 that

> [i]n the eyes of the general reader it is the Thirties that continue to typify the modern movement in verse. Now, however, there are signs that this twenty-year old domination is coming to an end. New names in the reviews, a fresh atmosphere of controversy, a new spirit of criticism — these are signs that some other group of poets is appearing on the horizon [...] there is some evidence that the present generation has been sufficiently affected by common influences and circumstances for a not too vague zeitgeist to be apparent in their productions. (Hartley, 1954: 260)

Another influential critic, Donald Davie, who is also a poet associated with the Movement, drew attention to the social conditions in the post-war era that gave rise to a new literary tendency in the early 1950s. Davie's astute observation about his contemporaries' social and educational background deserves quoting at some length

> I'm like Wain and Larkin and others in not being a product of the provinces known to the tourist, but of the industrial Midlands, in my case the South Yorkshire coalfield; and, like nearly everyone in the group I'm a product of the lower middle class, that is, of a stratum of British society in which the life of the mind is not taken for granted as taking a part of everyone's time, but rather, where it is honoured at all, has to be struggled for and is therefore embraced with more tenacity, fervour, and militancy. Accordingly, my history is the history of my education and duplicates that of all the rest — a winning of the way to one of the ancient universities by competitive examination, rather than going there as a matter of course as in the case of products of more privileged classes, such as Spender, Auden, Lehmann and Connolly and almost every writer of previous generations that you can think of.
>
> [The Movement's] sociological importance is very great and it consists in this – that for the first time a challenge is thrown down, not by individuals like Lawrence, Arnold, Bennet, Dylan Thomas, but by a more or less coherent group, to the monopoly of British culture sustained for generations by the London haut-bourgeois. (qtd. in Chatterjee, 2006: 88)

In the absence of an explicit aesthetic programme or manifesto, later critics also tend to focus on the emerging poets' reaction to the cultural climate of the post-war England to explain the literary codes of the Movement. In other words, it seems that the term "the Movement" has served as a practical keyword that help interrogate the works of the emerging poets of the 1950s, rather than a interpretive grid with a precise theoretical framework. In this light, it would not be completely incongruous to suggest that the poetry of the 1950s is a call for scholars to conduct research on the liminal ground between the larger domain of societal changes and the private world of the poet. In Larkin's case, it means negotiating a large body of private letters and interviews. Accordingly, the remainder of this paper aim to discuss extracts from Larkin's poems, interviews and private writings to reveal the image of the poet in dialogue with his times and with himself.

The Poet of Provincial Melancholy

A growing sense of provincialism and insularity dominated English literature in the 1950s. As Sisir Kumar Chatterjee succinctly points out, in aftermath of the Second World War, the English developed a nostalgic sense of nationalism and resolutely encouraged everything that is English as a compensation for the decline of England's military and political power in the world. (Chatterjee, 2006: 90). In this nationalistic atmosphere, the Movement poets eschewed subject matters that fell outside the cultural borders of the island. Their prejudice against non-English themes is perhaps nowhere more evident than in Kingsley Amis's disparaging comment: "Nobody wants any more poems about philosophers or paintings or novelists or art galleries or mythology or foreign cities or other poems." (qtd. in Morrison, 1980: 61). Provincialism has a significant place in Larkin's poetry as well. In many occasions, Larkin expressed his controversial ideas about the influence of foreign literature, provincialism and insularity as openly, if not as crudely, as Amis. For example, when he is accused of cultural chauvinism in an interview by John Haffenden because of his distaste for foreign literature, Larkin contended, "[b]ut honestly, how far can one really assimilate literature in another language? In the sense that you can read your own?" (Larkin, 2001:54). Larkin's ideas about his native culture should not, however, be taken at face value to promote the poet as a national hero, as he once admitted that he never had a strong commitment to any place, including Hull, where he spent most of his life. When asked in an interview whether he liked living in Hull, Larkin replied:

> I don't really notice where I live: as long as a few simple wants are satisfied – peace, quiet, warmth – I don't mind where I am. As for Hull, I like it because it's so far away from everywhere else. On the way to nowhere, as somebody put it. It's in the middle of this lonely country, and beyond the lonely country there's only the sea. I like that. (Larkin, 1983: 54)

The feelings of solitude and detachment do not only surface in his interviews or private writings; many of his famous poems are the fruits of his grim world of loneliness. In "Places, Loved Ones," for instance, Larkin rejects the idea of rootedness with a bitter confession;

> No, I have never found
> The place where I could say
> This is my proper ground,
> Here I shall stay. (Larkin, 2012: 29)

In this light, it seems that Larkin saw himself as a solitary man who happened to be born in England, rather than as a fortunate individual who is proud to have been born an English poet. In other words, Larkin's version of provincialism or insularity is marked by the feelings of isolation, detachment and solitude, for he never felt at home anywhere, not even in his own country.

In many of his poems, Larkin appears as a detached observer, strolling through English towns and countryside recording scenes from hotels, hospitals, train stations, pubs and beaches. The common threads in these poems are descriptive language and retrospection. In poems, such as "Whitsun Wedding," "To the Sea," "Friday Night in Royal Station Hotel," "The Building," "Livings," and "Show Saturday" Larkin employs an extremely descriptive language and draws a picture of the surrounding environment down to its minute details. Then, the speaker contemplates the feelings inspired by the particular

scene almost in a Wordsworthian style. In "To the Sea," for example, the speaker "[steps] over the low wall that divides/Road from concrete walk above the shore" but he does not join the holidaymakers (Larkin, 1974: 9). He simply watches them in their annual ritual, teaching their children to swim and attending their old ones. The scene momentarily reminds him of his own childhood memories with his family at sea: "I searched the sand for Famous Cricketers,/Or, farther back, my parents, listeners/To the same seaside quack, first became known" (Larkin, 1974: 9). But, he abandons the memories evoked by the scene with an abrupt break, "Strange to it now, I watch the cloudless scene" and continues to report what is happening at the seaside. Similarly, the speaker in "Friday Night in Royal Station Hotel" describes an empty hotel. In the first stanza, Larking conveys an atmosphere of stillness and emptiness through familiar images: "Through open doors, the dining-room declares/A larger loneliness of knives and glass./And silence laid like carpet." (Larkin, 1974: 18) Left on his own when other guests leave for Leeds, the speaker faces utter loneliness:

> In shoeless corridors, the lights burn. How
> Isolated, like a fort, it is—
> The headed paper, made for writing home
> (If home existed) letters of exile: *Now*
> *Night comes on. Waves fold behind villages*. (Larkin, 1974: 18, italics original)

"Going, Going" has an exceptional place in Larkin's *oeuvre* as it is the poem in which Larkin explicitly mourns the waning of rural England, instead of simply depicting the scenes from English provincial life. As the title of the poem suggests, Larkin likens England to a profitable object in an auction. Entrepreneurs are spreading through the unspoilt parts of the country to look for lands to start businesses. In the opening stanza the speaker expresses the shock caused by the destruction of markers of English culture at an unprecedented pace. "The shadows," "the meadows," "the lanes," "the guildhalls" and "the carved choirs" are being swallowed by the insatiable greed of the post-industrial society. As the picture of England as he knows it slips away, Larkin turns his critical gaze to a fashionable café and presents a disturbingly plain portrait of the English society.

> [...] The Crowd
> Is young in the M1 cafe;
> Their kids are screaming for more -
> More houses, more parking allowed,
> More caravan sites, more pay.
> On the Business Page, a score
>
> Of spectacled grins approve
> Some takeover bid that entails
> Five per cent profit (and ten
> Per cent more in the estuaries): move
> Your works to the unspoilt dales
> (Grey area grants)! (Larkin, 1974: 21-22)

The poem ends in a pessimistic tone. The speaker believes that English people will be left with nothing but concrete and tyres very soon. They could appreciate the old England only in galleries and books "and that will be England gone" (Larkin, 1974: 22). "Going, Going" shows that Larkin was undoubtedly motivated by the wider concern of preserving English countryside, which is one of the strongest threads that links Larkin's poetry with

the Movement. Therefore, the poem can be regarded as the pinnacle of his devoted provincialism and that of the Movement poetry at large.

An Unyielding Anti-modernist

In seeking to outline the characteristics of English poetry in the 1950s, the critics customarily turn to two poetry collections compiled by the poets associated with the Movement. A prominent representative of this line of criticism is Blake Morrison, who maintains, "[…] the Movement's 'personnel' came with the appearance of two poetry anthologies: *Poets of the 1950s* (1955) edited by D. J. Enright and *New Lines* (1956) edited by Robert Conquest" (Morrison, 1980: 2-3). Morrison's approach was also adopted by later critics, such as Stephen Regan and Andrew Swarbrick, who present a detailed discussion of both anthologies in their works (Regan, 1992: 16-17; Swarbrick, 1995: 76-77). There is certainly merit in this line of thought, particularly when it is employed in a complementary fashion to historically or culturally oriented criticism. Suffice it to say that it is the Movement poets' reactions to their antecedents of the 1920s and 1930s, particularly their theories of poetry, shall help define the contours of their own poetry. It is in this context that Andrew Swarbrick refers to D. J. Enright's editorial essay to his anthology as the corpus of the Movement. Swarbrick argues that Enright captures the essence of the Movement poetry in this essay by making "a call for a poetry steering a middle course between despairing imitations of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) and the neo-romanticism of the 1940s" (Swarbrick, 1995: 77). D. J. Enright's call for a poetry carefully distanced from the two preceding literary trends provides a practical insight into the poetics of the Movement. Indeed, if it was provincialism that gave the Movement one of its constant characteristics, it was the poets' rejection of their immediate predecessors' aesthetic principles that formed the basis of their shared poetics. The Movement poets' animus against modernism and the theories developed by its towering figure T. S. Eliot are particularly significant in this respect. It is therefore worth dwelling a little on Larkin's ideas concerning modernism.

Modernism is obviously one of the things that Larkin disliked most. In the introduction to his *All What Jazz,* Larkin explains that his contempt for modernism is not a simple matter of style or taste. He condemns modernist writers and artists alike for their ignorance of social and ethical dimensions of art for the sake of aesthetic experimentation. He states,

> I dislike such things [the works of major modernist writers and artists] not because they are new, but because they are irresponsible exploitations of technique in contradiction of human life as we know it. It is my essential criticism of modernism, whether perpetrated by Pound, Parker or Picasso: it helps us neither to enjoy nor to endure. It will divert us as long as we are prepared to be mystified or outraged, but maintains its hold only by being more mystifying and more outrageous: it has no lasting power. Hence, the compulsion on every modernist to wade deeper and deeper into violence and obscenity […] (Larkin, 1983: 297)

Larkin's theory of poetry is also endowed with a number of contentions against modernism. In his relatively short essay, titled "The Pleasure Principle," Larkin attacks the central tenets of modernism, such as intellectual elitism, use of complex language and avant-garde experimentalism. He believes that with the rise of modernism, which he calls "a cunning merger between poet, literary critic and academic critic," poetry lost its principle function: to give pleasure to its audience. (Larkin, 1983: 81) Modernists promoted an idea of poetry as a highly intellectual enterprise only available to a small

elite, which led to a radical shift in the traditional roles of the poet and the reader. While the poet "gained a happy position where he can praise his own poetry in the press and explain it in the classroom," the reader was reduced to the level of a student who "cannot appreciate poetry without preliminary investment in the intellectual equipment" (Larkin, 1983: 81). No matter how hard literary critics try to mystify it with their theoretical derogation, Larkin believes that poetry, or more precisely the act of composing a poem, is a simple pursuit with a tripartite structure:

> [...] the first is when a man becomes obsessed with an emotional concept to such a degree that he is compelled to do something about it. What he does is the second stage, namely, construct a verbal device that will reproduce this emotional concept in anyone cares to read it, anywhere, anytime. The third stage is the recurrent situation of people in different times and places setting off the device and re-creating in themselves what poet felt when he wrote it. (Larkin, 1983: 80)

The excerpt above introduces fundamental points of departure from modernist theory of poetry. First and foremost, Larkin takes a stand against the idea of elitism, notoriously associated with modernism, with his contention that poetry is not a product of a complex artistic exercise, but a means of self-expression, pure and simple. Against the divisive elitism of modernist poets, Larkin, like many of his contemporaries, attempted "to minimize social differences rather than exaggerate them" (Larkin, 1983: 17). Therefore, he generally preferred to write about familiar subjects rather than intellectually challenging ones and employed an accessible language. The use of colloquialism and slang was one of the defining characteristics of his poetry. In addition to accessibility, the Movement poets also had a strong sense of audience as they advocate for a poetry that is involving and establishes a bond with the reader. The stylistic features of the Movement poetry reflect this desire to reach large numbers of readers. According to Blake Morrison, the movement poets employed a basic narrative structure where "the poet begins by inviting the reader to listen (Now this is what happened, and what I thought and felt) and finishes by implicating him in what has been said ('we all experience/think/feel this don't we)" (Morrison, 1980: 126). Secondly, Larkin's simplistic treatment of poetry as a manifestation of emotions contradicts with the modernist theory of objective correlative developed by T. S. Eliot, who argues that "poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality" (Eliot, 1937: 21. For Eliot, the only way for a poet to express his/her emotions in the form of art is through an objective correlative, which he describes, as "a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate In sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked" (145). Last but not least, Larkin's ideas concerning the critical appreciation of poetry also differs from Eliot's. Eliot believes that a work of art can attain value only in relation to the preceding tradition and its representative works; therefore, he asserts that "no poet, no artist of any art, has complete meaning alone" (Eliot, 1937: 15). For Larkin, on the other hand, each poem stands alone and the reader does not need to refer to any texts outside the poem to appreciate its meaning. "As a guiding principle," Larkin states, "I believe that every poem must be its own sole freshly-created universe, and therefore have no belief in 'tradition' or a common myth-kitty or causal allusions in poems or poets [...] A poet's only guide is his own judgement" (Larkin, 1983: 79).

Larkin's 1977 poem "Aubade" can be regarded as a core text that clearly exemplifies the sharp divisions between the Movement and modernist poetry. The poem reads like a personal statement about death, or rather fear of death. As his private letters indicate,

Larkin completed "Aubade," which he considers to be "the only substantial poem [he] has done since *High Windows*," in three years (Larkin, 1992: 652). These letters also allow critics to trace Larkin's progress in composing the poem. In a letter to Monica Jones dated 8 November 1952, Larkin mentions death as a primary issue of high literature, and insists that it should be treated with respect and mastery. "To me," he writes," "since death is the most important thing about life [...], so the expression of death & the effects of death are the highest planes of literature [...] and should not be lightly loosed upon the populace [...]" (Larkin, 2012: 495). It seems that he grew more and more obsessed with the idea of death in time. In a letter to Winifred Arnott dated 9 June 1977, Larkin writes, "I get less used to the fact of death as I grow older & I was never very used to it" (Larkin, 2012: 495). It is in a letter to Kingsley Amis dated 12 August 1977 that we find the story told in "Aubade": "Poetry, that rare bird, has flown out of the window and now sings on some alien shore. In other words I just drink these days... I wake at four and lie worrying till seven. Loneliness. Death. Law suits. Talent gone. Law suits. Loneliness. Talent gone. Death. I really am not happy these days." (Larkin, 2012: 495). As the striking verbal similarity between the letter and the poem suggests, "Aubade" is basically a versification of the feelings of frustration and distress that the poet experienced towards the end of his life. In other words, Larkin's obsession with the approaching death gradually grew into a poem, which constitutes the initial stage of his tripartite structure of poetry:

> I work all day, and get half drunk at night.
> Waking at four to soundless dark, I stare.
> In time the curtain-edges will grow light.
> Till then I see what's really always there:
> Unresting death, a whole day nearer now,
> Making all thought impossible but how
> And where and when I shall myself die.
> Arid interrogation: yet the dread
> Of dying, and being dead,
> Flashes afresh to hold and horrify (Larkin, 2012: 115)

The poem also encapsulates the essence of the Movement poetry in terms of language and technique. Even though Larkin deals with a serious subject like death, he employs plain language without elaborate conceits or allusions to myths about death. It is written in a sincere tone to communicate its massage to anyone who reads it. In other words, unlike modernist poems, "Aubade" does not require the reader to be familiar with any texts outside itself.

Conclusion

From its uncertain beginnings in the 1950s, the Movement, reified in anthologies and bestowed a canon of its own, has come to define a prolific era of English poetry. However, the discussions on its theoretical foundations resurface with every attempt to study the poets associated with the Movement. One reason for this is that the Movement did not start as a proper literary group with a clear manifesto, that is, there is no an intricate pattern of alliances, or a precise set of principles acknowledged by these poets. To complicate the matter further many of the poets associated with the Movement claimed to have no sense of belonging to any literary groups or schools of poetry.[4] This vague sense of a group identity necessitates a bottom-up approach where the characteristics of a

[4] For an extended discussion on the origins of the Movement, see Stephen Regan 13-25 and Blake Morrison 10-55.

literary movement are explored through the analysis of individual poets. Accordingly, the theoretical contours of the Movement poetry has been defined through the poems, interviews and private writings of Philip Larkin in this study. Evidently, Larkin's poetry was a response to an increasingly urgent need to represent the sensibilities of the post-war English society. He was attracted to the sense of provincialism that dominated the post-war era and wrote many poems depicting scenes from English provincial life. Furthermore, Larkin's theory of poetry that he laid out unsystematically in various essays and interviews bears strong affinities with the emerging literary trend in the 1950s. Particularly important is his rejection of modernist principles for the sake of a more accessible poetry both in terms of language and subject matter. The strong sense of provincialism and anti-modernist principles in his poetry help establish a link between Larkin and the poetic style that came to be referred to as the Movement. However, it is important to remember that the critical discussion presented in this study is not an attempt to place Larkin in a literary group whose existence is highly dubious, but to show that his poetry and theoretical writings epitomise the essence of an important phase in English poetry.

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