A critic may feel embarrassed to write a critical evaluation or revaluation of Philip Larkin, if he or she gets seriously affected by some of the observations made by Larkin. He was emphatic in 1957, two years after the arrival of *The Less Deceived*, when he said:

More accurately, poetry has lost its old audience, and gained a new one. This has been caused by the consequences of a cunning merger between poet, literary critic and academic critic (three classes now notoriously indistinguishable). ¹

Larkin who applauded the "unspecialized" ² and "pleasure-seeking audience" ³ considered poetry as an affair of compulsive contact between them and the poet, and declared: "I should hate anybody to read my work because he’s been told to and told what to think about it". ⁴

Larkin, however, was happy to read in 1973 David Timm’s *Philip Larkin*, the first full-length study of his own work, growing out of an M. A. thesis that Timms wrote at the University of Leicester. Larkin felt it a great honour to have a book written about him, and looked “forward to its appearance with shameful eagerness”. ⁵

Larkin’s conviction that “Poetry is an affair of sanity, of seeing things as they are,” ⁶ made him replace the “modernist” Yeats in favour of the “traditionalist” Hardy as his “ideal.” The poet of *The North Ship*, adopting symbolist strategy to give language to his “airy-fairy” romanticism, came to realize the importance of Hardy, who carried forward the English tradition of the nineteenth century, and added a new dimension to it. “When I came to Hardy,” Larkin said, “it was with the sense of relief that I didn’t have to try and jack myself upto a concept of poetry that lay outside my own life – that is perhaps what I felt Yeats was trying to make me do”. ⁷ The shocking
state of civilization during and after the Second World War, economic debacle and erosion in cherished traditional values had arrested Larkin's vigilant attention to the "expository, documentary, empirical and rational" components, which were supposed to be approved by the members of the Movement of 1950s in programme of their works. Larkin, in the considered opinion of Blake Morrison, was the leading "member" of the Movement. The movement was "a literary group of considerable importance - probably the most influential in England since the Imagists." Larkin naturally disapproved in any work of a poet the riot of metaphors, cluster of complicated symbols, abundance of allusions, an extreme emotionality, a passion for myth making, an inclination towards mystification and the predominance of vision over reason. In short, Larkin rejected the strategies of the "modernists". "I may flatter myself," Larkin said in an Interview with The Observer in 1979, "but I think in one sense I'm like Evelyn Waugh or John Betjeman, in that there's not much to say about my work. When you've read a poem, that's it, it's all quite clear what it means".

But, in spite of what he would make us believe of himself in 1965 as a "patient sleeping soundly", after his "Celtic fever abated," Larkin paradoxically negotiated some of the techniques of the "modernists," making a synthesis of the two pulls - traditional and modern, and, thus recognizing ultimately both Hardy and Yeats. Three years earlier what he had said of his own poem, "Absences," may be taken into consideration in this context: "I fancy it sounds like a different, better poet than myself. The last line sounds like a slightly-unconvincing translation from a French Symbolist. I wish I could write like this more often".

Larkin's declared literary principles and his observations on critics and criticisms are, therefore, not conclusive. A number of revealing paradoxes are rather natural corollary of the multiple selves of the poet in terms of his response to the given post-War socio-economic and cultural spectrum where contradictions constitute the principal components of life. But, the truth that emerges is that Philip Larkin (1922–1985) is recognized as one of the major influential writers to have emerged in England since the Second World War. "With the publication of High Windows (1974), and the years since". Anthony Thwaite asserted, "there has been a
consolidation of the general – both critical and popular – view that Philip Larkin is the finest living poet writing in English. It is, therefore, not surprising that a considerable number of articles and books on Larkin, containing a diverse range of topics, have been produced.

Larkin in a letter to Norman Iles in 1944 defined his aspiration as a creative artist: “I feel that myself and my character are nothing except insofar as they contribute to the creation of literature – that is almost the only thing that interests me now.” His first anthology of poetry, The North Ship, showing the impact of Yeats, was published in 1945; while his two novels, Jill and A Girl in Winter, appeared in 1946 and 1947. But Larkin had to eagerly wait for wide critical reception and recognition till 1955, when he produced his second collection of poetry, The Less Deceived. The Times considered the anthology “in its round-up of the year’s outstanding books.” Larkin was elated to acknowledge in 1956 that The Less Deceived, marking “the decisive turning point” in his career, continued “to win friends and influence people, notably Roy Fuller in the London Magazine”. The Whitsun Weddings (1964) and High Windows (1974) consolidated enthusiastically enduring interest in Larkin by the reviewers – both his defenders and detractors.

Larkin declined to accept the offer of the poet Laureateship, yet he was acknowledged widely as the “nation’s unofficial poet Laureate.” But his secure reputation was challenged in the decade following his death. Stephen Regan has aptly described the reasons: “With the publication of the Collected Poems in 1988, Selected Letters in 1992 and the authorized biography, Philip Larkin: A Writer’s Life, in 1993, the abiding interests and concerns of Larkin scholarship were radically and decisively altered.”

Larkin’s eminence as a poet was so far well-protected by a small body of work; and “during his lifetime the general impression of his actual output of poems was that it was sparse – an impression Larkin did nothing to dispel.” Collected Poems, edited by Anthony Thwaite, printed Larkin’s eighty-three unpublished poems, almost doubling the number of his previously published ones; and this contradicted
the "impression" that the calculated economy in producing poems was the secret of his art and success. Moreover, the critical perception of Larkin's development as a poet required a fresh insight following the publication of the poems for the first time in the Collected Poems, making two-part chronological arrangement.

Larkin's Selected Letters, edited by Anthony Thwaite, stirred up the literary world, throwing light on the remarkable complex idiosyncrasies of a writer, who considered writing and receiving letters "very important." "They are," as Thwaite defined, "an informal record of the lonely, gregarious, exuberant, desolate, close-fisted, generous, intolerant, compassionate, eloquent, foul-mouthed, harsh and humorous Philip Larkin."22 True, the letters, making up kaleidoscopic self-portrait"23 of Larkin, were greeted as genuinely "interesting" and "entertaining," but they were at the same time bitterly criticized. They, according to Tom Paulin, brought to focus Larkin's "racism, misogyny and quasi-fascist views."24 Larkin's reputation, Lisa Jardine admitted like others, was centrally associated with his upholding and conserving "cherished values" inherent in traditional British culture or "British way of life;"25 but the published letters shockingly soiled gradually but steadily constructed image of the poet. Many of Larkin's epistolary targets such as writer Tariq Ali and poet Kathleen Raine decried Larkin as a "mediocre poet".26

The critical debate generated by the publication of the Selected Letters turned towards a new dimension, when Andrew Motion's biography, authorized by the estate of Philip Larkin, came out in 1993. The carefully protected private life of the "Hermit of Hull" was laid bare to the readers, shattering the impression once more that he epitomized a personality 'almost' beyond the reach of average human beings. The book, drawing and quoting from a huge amount of previously unpublished materials, charted the complex course of Larkin's life, and arrested the attention of the readers to some explosive facts, such as his emotionally and physically intimate relationships with women, creating often in him a sense of deep-rooted agony and frustration. Larkin's character, as Motion saw it, is a mix, combining the elements - 'extraordinary', and 'ordinary.' His poems are largely rooted in his life. Dislike for marriage, boredom, death and isolation are his major themes, which are generated by
his trauma in the early age following the unhappy conjugal life of his parents – Sydney and Eva. This is echoed in “Dockery and son”: “Life is first boredom, then fear. / Whether or not we use it, it goes, / And leaves what something hidden from us chose, / And age, and then the only end of age” (Collected Poems, 153). Pointing out to the contradictions and inner conflicts of Larkin, Andrew Motion in the Introduction to the biography, described the “pretty dismal ground” out of which the “beautiful flowers of his poetry” “blossomed” and remarked: “Describing this ground must necessarily alter the image of Larkin that he prepared so carefully for his readers”.27 Stephen Regan summed up how most of the “reviews that followed seemed intent on relegating Larkin to the league of minor poets”28

It would arguably be oversimplification, and, hence, unjust to consider Larkin’s work as a “simple reflex of personality” with reference to his letters and biography, and to underestimate his achievement as a writer. Larkin, as Motion felt unquestionably, “understood that the relationship he had created between ‘high’ art and ‘ordinary’ existence was a remarkable one, which deserved to be made public.”29 The utterances of “ordinary” existence are released from their “surrounding material” by the poetic “persona”, which is the creation of “high” art. The process of release is achieved by the poetic “persona” or “disguise” in Larkin’s poems through performative components or “dramas or confessions”30 as termed by Ian Hamilton. Moreover Andrew Motion, the author of Larkin’s definitive biography, articulated that “the vast majority of Larkin’s work magnificently floats free of its surrounding material”;31 and was firm in declaring that “art is not a convulsive expression of personality. It is much more subtle than that.”32 Motion, like others, believed unwaveringly in “undiminished” greatness of Larkin as a poet. Dom Moraes, a celebrated Indian writer, though gratuitously attacked by Larkin in his letter, continued to remain unmistakably a “die-hard” admirer of Larkin’s poetry: “He was extremely boring, and he looked it, but he was a fantastic poet”.33
NOTES & REFERENCES


Larkin in his article “The Pleasure Principle” (1957) laments that the poets nowadays do not give prime importance to the readers. The poets are obsessed with the idea that they should demonstrate “what they already know.” That is why the readers cannot understand the works of the poets “without references” which remain beyond their own limits. This mechanical approach, Larkin feels, cannot naturally allow the readers, to “understand and enjoy” poetry. Larkin firmly believes that “at bottom poetry, like all art, is inextricably bound up with giving pleasure.”

2 Andrew Motion, Philip Larkin (London: Methuen, 1982) 11.


4 P. Larkin, “An Interview with the Observer,” Required Writing, 56.


7 P. Larkin, “The Poetry of Thomas Hardy”, Required Writing, 175.

8 A. Motion, Philip Larkin, 12.

9 Blake Morrison’s The Movement: English Poetry and Fiction of the 1950s (London: Oxford University Press, 1980) is a pioneering work on the history of the literary group of the 1950s known as the Movement.


14 qtd. in A. Motion, *Philip Larkin*, 74.


23 *Ibid.*, XV.


27 A. Motion, Philip Larkin: A Writer’s Life, XX


29 A. Motion, Philip Larkin: A Writer’s Life, XX

30 Andrew Swarbrick has defined Ian Hamilton’s concept of Larkinesque “persona” in page 214 of his essay “Larkin’s Identities” in Philip Larkin, ed. S. Regan.

31 qtd. in S. Regan, ed. Philip Larkin, 6.
