CHAPTER THREE
THE AUTHENTICITY OF LARKIN'S POETRY

The authenticity of Larkin's poetry lies in the spontaneous and lucid remarkability of its features. If the mark of a great poet is that he arouses contradictory opinions then Larkin surely would be a strong contender, as the critics have commented on him both favorably and unfavorably. In the following discussion it would be logical to look at the negative critical opinions about Larkin first and then to verify them from a universal standard. The attack on Larkin, like the praise, has of course centered on the question of his content and style. Amidst contradictory criticism it becomes difficult to judge him, as he makes a transition and shifts between the best and the worst. On the whole Larkin has inspired a lively debate about his true status as a poet. Moreover, Larkin's essential attitude has been ambivalent and ironic on all the issues related to man and his vision, so critics have continued to argue unendingly without drawing any final conclusion.

Regarding the content of Larkin's poems, or his realism many critics have found that he is too trivial and limited in range. Those who support Larkin opine that he oftentimes writes no doubt on limited themes but he is never tedious. His approach to same themes such as death and loneliness, for instance, is not only varied but each time he returns with profundity and thereby give insistence upon their propriety. Alan Brownjohn, for instance, has said that Larkin's poems
over the last thirty years have shown little development, that in poem after poem he reasserts the same belittling bleakness with the same techniques and tactics. His themes do not enlarge, his style does not develop and he has nothing new to say. On the other hand Ted Hughes, who is more daringly experimental than Larkin has said that Larkin's poems are sad, and he liked them all, but the sadder they are the more he likes them. If Larkin is narrow in themes, then he is also a deeper poet.

Larkin's content, if surmised from his poems, would lead to poetic realism. Larkin strongly believed that man has little control over his fate and is constantly victimized by all sorts of self-deceptions due to wishful thinking. Larkin recommends that the only response to life is to deny any dreams. He refuses to being conned by life which leads him to deny any possibility of anything enduring or lasting. He sees life as a horror, yet he never shrinks from it. His poetry speaks for the suffering of man.

The recurring subjects in Larkin are that love seldom triumphs, human beings mostly remain confused on most of the matters, the disappointments in life, the pressures of the society on the individual, the desire to escape those pressures together with the fear of the isolation that escape brings, and above all the encroachment of time. The assumption of Larkin's poetry is that, anyone who does not see such reality is deluding himself. It is true such poetry is bound to be about disappointment, of the destruction of romantic
illusions, of man's defeat by time and his inadequacies. It could almost be seen as the poetry of the impotent self. It is undoubtedly a sad picture of shrunken reality; the withering of the idea, romance and possibility.

Larkin is especially a master in recording how death when kept suppressed, could return more powerfully with a chilling force. Such apocalyptic horrors prove all protective devices useless, leaving us in stunned helplessness. Out of such helpless plight he seems to accept uncertainty as the necessary condition of life. This uncertainty brings with it a feeling of disillusionment. One faces the same problems wherever one goes. Illusion or self-deception colours all our thinking. He almost mocks the human habit of seeing each moment in relation to an imaginary and hopeful future. The inadequacy of the present is something we can never escape from. As such Larkin's poetry is a unique body of verse exemplifying the self-imprisoned limitations of an individual who finds it impossible to face reality and to retain its dreams. Essentially, it is an apocalyptic nightmare which somehow has to be endured.

One of the peculiarities of Larkin is that his themes are both at once personal as well as perennial. So when Ian Hamilton says that "the great drawback of Larkin's work is its rather narrow range of negative attitudes" (Timms 1973:102), the comment itself seems narrow. Hamilton is not the only one to criticize Larkin for narrowness of themes. For instance, there is M.L. Rosenthal who comments about the major characteristic
of Larkin's poetry as "petty bitterness about life deriving from the poet's own self-pity" (Timms 1973:88). Christopher Logue describes Larkin's poetry as "genteel bellyaching" (Timms 1973:73). Even Raymond Gardiner is not very different when he comments that: "Larkin's poetry represents an art of desolation ..... it lacks the humanity of comfort" (Haffenden 1980:88). In reply to all such adverse criticism Larkin himself said that the critics expect that: "As if I shouldn't be myself, I should be somebody else" (Haffenden 1980:88). So it seems that Larkin has been judged for not being the poet he ought to be, rather than the poet he is. Nobody would doubt that Larkin, more than anything else, is an unillusioned observer of life's sad comedy. He is dry, wry and wistful. He is surely a nihilist pessimist. G.S. Fraser, too, objects to Larkin's poetry, stating: "Larkin's view is diminishing in that for Larkin, the sensible man or woman settles for the second best" (Timms 1973:88). Other critics, who can be quoted ad nauseum, have blamed Larkin for his "Conservatism," "Little Englandism," "diminished and lower sight," "lack of affirmation," "spiritual anorexia," "lack of gentility," and for even his boorishness. Against all this Larkin never claims to be the moral censor, though morality is implied in his empirical attitude and he writes only about that which he experienced and felt. Not to delude oneself is perhaps the strongest moral attitude. Larkin would rather include himself in his Dantesque world of irony and mockery. His tone is always self-deprecatory. He never attempts to alter the facts of his own experience. Larkin is very much conscious that
human life is determined by powers outside its control. It is
time which decides everything. The best a man can do is not to
delude himself into thinking that life can be otherwise. Un-
doubtedly Larkin's soul is sensitive and his poetry is about
the abrasions of an unfavorable condition on such a soul. It
is a poetic war against the ravages of time.

Larkin's most frequent theme is the conflict between reality
and romance, the first being invariably unpleasant and the
second something that is always desired by us. It is always
the dilemma. He offers a set of premises about life and from
them comes to the conclusion that life is virtually futile.
The aspects that compel him to write poems are life's
miserable aspects. Larkin rejects any ideal because there is a
sense in which life's shortcomings, which are also ours, are
to be preferred to any ideal. Larkin's insistence on truth is
gentle. He reflects on our idealization in two ways: first, to
allow us to know truth through experience and then, contrast
it with what might have been. Secondly, the glare of
idealization invariably blinds us to the light of truth.
Larkin emphasizes that our idealizations are in effect our
delusions. He is also bitter at our suffering inflicted by
the truth, but such bitterness is a creative impulse for
Larkin.

Perhaps it would be more right to say that Larkin's point of
view is more or less a matter of inverted Platonism, because
the Platonist Reality, which is ulterior, becomes a fantasy in
Larkin's poetic world. Platonic Ideal is essential to human
state as we are unable to exist without the impossible. Larkin’s realism, then, implies a hard view of life. With a human world caught up in time, desire and disappointment, connects him to the tradition of Western philosophy which distinguishes the ideal and the real. However, Larkin focuses on the ambivalence between his inability to believe in the old certainties and the need to forsake it completely.

His emphasis on the bleakness of life amounts to a quiet approval to look at reality with honesty. He denies imagination or delusion for drab truth. He rejects, too, a false redemption through imagination. In a way writing for Larkin is a test of his own honesty. Larkin has found poetry in a sterile reality by proving that it can be borne with grace and gentleness. Calvin Bedient for instance, rightly comments that:

Larkin is unillusioned, with a metaphysical zero in his bones. Larkin’s dismissal itself is a proud, self-affirming act, a model response. Because Larkin can find poetry and humour in an admittedly sterile world, he shows his readers a gentle and graceful way of coping with reality, and alternative to both romantic denial and nihilistic despair (Martin 1978 :141).

Larkin avoids excessive emotion as well as excessive rationality. He is, more appropriately, rationally sentimental.

His realism shows a pronounced preoccupation with time, disappointment, waste, the illusion of important issues like religion, and love, family, social life etc. Larkin presents himself, in his poems, most of the times, as a middle-aged bachelor who has missed most of the traditional pleasures of
life. The only freedom he has in his mind is freedom from illusions which are the source of happiness for other people. It is worth quoting Martin Dodsworth in this context, when he says about Larkin:

His poems are moving to the point of desolation because he lavished such great skill on saying what we would prefer not be said at all that life can overcome us with the sense of futility, that it is full of failure, and failure is rarely compensated for (Hasan 1988:1).

Such negative attitude or pessimism is an element of strength in Larkin's poetry.

Owing to his skepticism towards everything traditional, Larkin sounds as an epitome of England's post-war crisis in recognizing that the issues of man's relationship to his past, to some aspect of tradition, has become critical in our age which is wary of those traditional institutions which once directed our behavior in the past. The impulse which guided Yeats in his search for an authentic Irish past and mythological constructions, and which also guided Eliot in accepting Anglo-Catholicism, seems to have aroused by a similar impulse, in Larkin too.

Some critics have criticized Larkin for being limited in scope regarding his themes. But it can be also said that only the surfaces of Larkin's themes are limited and modest. His subject-matter is universal as it deals with time, death, Idealism, dualism, free will and fate. Such themes are no doubt single-directed, in the sense, they speak for the duality of man. Larkin sees humanity in relation to time, choice, morality, love, sex, history and image of the self as
a result of simultaneity or duality.

Larkin does not see the real world as an ostensible reality reflecting or symbolizing a deeper or ulterior reality. But his view is a kind of Platonism in the sense that it distinguishes the real and the ideal. It would be more appropriate to call it as Platonism turned inside out. What to Platonists are "appearances" are to Larkin a reality, and what to them is Reality is to him a fantasy or illusion. He understands the Platonic Ideal in human wishes or imagination, which, though invariably at variance with experienced reality, is part of human awareness. To Larkin human beings act as if there were a transcendent reality. In short, his Platonism is one in which the Ideal is a glorified abstraction of the real which is an illusion, but one which ought to be named a Real Illusion since to conceive it resides in the nature of man. It is this plight that makes disillusionment inescapable and each choice unavoidably false.

Man's duality and the painful disjunction of the ideal and the real, which incorporate his realism, are in fact universal themes. They are true at any time and in all places. Within such an atmosphere, man's dualism is understood and uniquely acted out. Larkin's essential themes are man's inner and outer conflict with nature and reality, the gap between human hope and cold reality, the illusory nature of choice, frustration with one's lot in a dismal reality, and the future which brings only forlorn age and cold death.
Larkin is always writing about personal malady and the mutation of innocent world-view. His poems touch upon most of society's institutions, from marriage to house-parties, economic imbalance to department stores, from church to hospital. Against the fate of an individual in the contemporary mid-twentieth-century he brings in a national past in which life was more or less ordered and attractive. He shows respect for places and activities which include uncomplicated human feelings. In the past he sees certain images of purity and serenity, known only at solitary moments, and which give him a feel of elevating above the mundane life.

Throughout Larkin's poetry the search for truth, as a positive value, is connected with his negativism. The disillusionment suffered by his speakers or characters always comes as a harsh awakening. Illusion lost implies truth found. But truth, in Larkin's scheme, is always a hard value, as it is never connected with happiness.

Larkin's ingenuity lies in dramatizing man's disjunction which is serio-comic, and this disjunction at times takes a tragic turn. The self-deceptions of Larkin's speakers are his means by which their sense of a different way appear to have come true. There are, no doubt, rationalizations as a method of wish-fulfillment. The need and construction of Ideal is always real which Larkin does not deny, but belief in the ideal must be avoided as it is seen as a lie. All the symbols of ideal in Larkin's poetry are exposed as lies, and they are free from
the aura of spiritual affirmation. In fact Larkin inverts the Platonic order of relationship, where the real is not the distorted shadow of transcendent reality, but rather the Ideal is distortion of the real. So the Ideal turns out to be profoundly the belief in a lie.

If, on the basis of his content, Larkin appears pessimistic then it is very true. In fact, as said earlier, he is sad because he is honest. Larkin has his own reasons to be pessimistic. Larkin has been quoted earlier that happy subjects for poetry are not long-lasting, and they don't hold any interest for him. This accounts for Larkin's pessimistic realism.

Honesty and awareness are the cardinal virtues in Larkin. Such honesty allows him to identify himself as a disappointed man who speaks with honest experience to be valued above frail dreams of fulfillment. Those who don not see the truth of it feel that such an attitude, as Larkin takes, dulls the appetite for life which reneges man's capacity to dream.

In regards to Larkin's style critics are as much divided in their opinions as in other matters about Larkin. If negative criticism harps on no technical or stylistic development in his poetic corpus, then his admirers think of it as a positive value, an indication that Larkin, from a very early stage, was quite clear about the direction he should follow.

Undoubtedly Larkin is less experimental, as he prefers to write in a conventional manner, and he is also a more
naturally assured craftsman. His verse is consummately crafted and needs to be valued for his skill in creating a sense of our intimate world which we instantly recognize as our own. Such an attempt to record things as they appear to him and the acknowledgement of the reader that this is same way many of us feel, is the measure of his achievement. Instead of trying to solve the problem, it is the recognition of the problem itself that truly matters. The only solution before him is to express it accurately and well. He never tries to change things, but express them as they are. His bare idiom, conversational ease the deliberate dryness, all these express his problems with an unmistakable precision and focus.

Larkin's style and subject-matter both come from what he is. In a way Larkin's style and content are interdependent. His deliberate or artistic restraint is his means of expression. There are moments in Larkin when the content remains difficult and elusive due to emotional complexity, but his technique is highly accomplished. The strength of Larkin's verse lies in its precision, clarity, formal mastery and rhythmic organization.

Larkin has been praised by some of his senior as well as contemporary poets without any reservation. For instance, in a broadcast of tributes to Larkin on his fiftieth birthday in 1972, W.H. Auden called him "a master of the English Language." Even T.S. Eliot has said that Larkin can say what he means, and that Larkin was a poet worth encouraging. Even a slightly senior poet like Betjeman had high praise and great admiration.
for Larkin. Among Larkin's immediate contemporaries very few have said radically anything against Larkin. For instance, A. Alvarez thought that Larkin's themes "may have changed superficially, but his style has not developed at all" (Timms 1973 :93). Another critic/ poet Francis Hope has said "Mr. Larkin was consistent to the point of being static" (Timms 1973 :93). Anthony Thwaite also has more or less the same criticism to make when he says: "there has been no radical development" (Timms 1973 :93). But D.J. Enright showers unqualified praise and has gone to the extent of stating that Larkin wrote like an angel. Even John Wain has stated:

He is the best craftsman now working in English. It shows what precision, what absolutely right hitting the nail on the head the English Language is still capable of (Wain 1964 :167).

Larkin's detractors do not doubt that technically Larkin is an extremely accomplished poet, who can use metre and rhyme for very specific effects. His Language is never flat, unless he intends it to be so for a particular reason, and his diction is always appropriate. His poems say what they have to say concretely, lucidly and economically. Despite the relative narrowness of his themes, Larkin writes with a wide range of tone and feeling. Larkin has after all said that "One has to be both sensitive and efficient" (Hamilton 1964 :77).

It is true that Larkin is against experimentation in the direction of formlessness. He has been highly individual and inventive without ceasing to be formal. There is always a sense of order in almost every poem he has written. There may be disputes and disagreements about the content of his poems,
but in the end they do render a feeling that a "tour de force" has indeed been completed as there is a definite sense of form. The simple appearance of his poems is deceptive; it means only that they can be easily read, but not always fully comprehended. If Larkin is difficult on occasion that is due to his wit, subtlety of sensibility, variety of nuances and connotations. He can use informal as well as highly formal or serious language. His sincere tone created by informal language is balanced with serious language without becoming stuffy or snobbish. Regarding Larkin’s wit, Calvin Bedient says:

Larkin’s wit is the ethics of his poetry. It brings his distress under our control. It makes his personal happiness our universal exultation. Armed with his wit, he faces the worst on our behalf, and brings it to order (Hasan 1988:2).

It is out of this sheer wit that there is in Larkin’s style an unresolved tension between formal regularity and irregularity. Style parallels the content, reminding of other tensions in his poems. Larkin hardly or almost never uses free-verse. His commitment to traditional verse is absolute.

The point of Larkin’s traditionalism, correctness, clarity is not just formalism but it is a means of writing communicative poetry. The ease and simplicity of his language implies faith in the communicability, of works existing in the common idiom. Larkin’s style, then, demonstrates the usability of common words. He revalidates the effectiveness of the language that men speak. Clive James has commented that it is "The distilled lyricism of common speech" (Thwaite 1982:107). Larkin has
shown he was a witty poet with immense verbal facility, capable of the most subtle modulations of tone, speaking a language vitalized by its relationship with the contemporary idiom. He demonstrated that he was a poet capable of strong feeling, compassion or scorn and of conveying those strong feelings in poetry. He has that rare gift of saying brutally simple things before which most of us stand more or less defeated or helpless. Besides being idiomatic, he also makes use of the colloquial. He at times even uses coarse and obscene expressions. If for some, such language seemed offensive and unnecessary, to others it meant Larkin's effective handling of language at any level. Larkin wrote in an idiom where lyrical purity coexist with vulgarism and obscenity when required.

In fact the use of common words can lead to cliches and a lack of precision and individuality. But in Larkin the meaning of a poem does not depend on individual words. Rather his manner of phrasing, the unique twist of thought, dialectic between opposite thoughts, and subtle fluctuations in tone and voice renew the stale words. Larkin speaks as a citizen of the world familiar to us. His commonplace diction distinguishes his poems as unpretentious. His recourse to the slang is his recognition that the language of the street is more honest and perhaps more effective than that of an academy.

Certainly Larkin is on the side of simplicity in poetry. The difficulty that Larkin avoids is not the difficulty of complex texture or meaning, but rather difficulties that would arise
out of human experience, thought or emotion.

One of the major aspects of Larkin's style is the rare and the uniquely individual tone of voice adopted by that unique Larkinesque persona. Mostly his personae are tormented, tragic figures possessed by self-consciousness. They repress nothing, have knowledge of their own limitations and are aware that the world of possibility which lies beyond actual experience exists. His mode is most of the time self-parodying and self-dismantling. The sad and sincere speaking voice suits such personae to the extent of being utterly natural. His persona is reliable and the reader can easily identify himself with it. He is a man speaking to men and sensitive and sympathetic sharer of life's pain.

The creation of an authentic and recognizable persona is perhaps Larkin's best stylistic achievement. His speakers are always the outsiders, the deniers, the disenchanted, the disappointed, the self-mockers and self-defenders. Critics have accused them as weak-willed and ill-tempered as if they were real people. In fact their bitter passivity is neither necessarily choiceless nor lacking in willed effort. These speakers do choose to work or sit doing nothing in the park, to be married or single, to write a poem or join the dance, to have a love-affair or be without one. They invariably find their choices unfulfilled not just because they desire contradictory things, but also because they are dualistic creatures for whom the right is the same as the ideal. For them choice is not always right, and satisfaction is
achievable because of the options that life offers.

Larkin's speakers are more or less selfish, cynical, pessimistic, dour, hostile or passive individuals and they invariably suffer. They are the epitome of the human condition in that they represent the very reality of man's conflict as his essential nature. This conflict with reality necessitates living with lies of one kind or another as the means of psychological tactics of survival. In a way Larkin's poems are a study into the need for lying. The speaker's rationalizations then are the antithesis. Instead of striving for the comfort of inclusiveness, they attempt to assuage loneliness, failure and fear, promoting the feeling of exclusiveness. They even elevate loneliness to the height of artistic individualism. Their defensive weapon is an implied moral superiority to those they envy. They regard their difference from others as a mark of special distinction. One singular technique that Larkin uses in his personae is their rationalization and illusions by means of dramatic monologue and internal dialogue. By this they expose their hidden character that lies beneath the surface of their speech through tone of voice, mannerisms of speech, reactions to the incidental details of their surroundings, and by selectivity of their remarks. Finally, regarding Larkin's style, Robert Lowell may be relevantly quoted:

No style or school could have given his words their poignant severity and who as an innovator made other styles obsolete (Petch 1981:5).

Besides the sad but true realism and impeccable style, the
authenticity of Larkin's poetry lies not only in personal popularity but in the popularity of his poetry. He is undoubtedly popular on account of his ordinariness, contemporaneity of subjects and his reader-oriented intention. He writes movingly and memorably about those aspects of life that were of great significance to his readers as well as to himself. He has given a slice of English sensibility, its crude laughter, its mock philistinism, as well as its tenderness, sadness, compassion and perception of beauty. He shares the basic emotional preoccupations with everyone. His public statements and the poems are the products of an integrity that go beyond art and are actually lived.

About Larkin's ordinariness in style and matter, or life and style, Colin Falck has commented that:

Larkin captures the feel of life for many ordinary people, nevertheless insists that he has done this only at the expense of a deeper and more important humanity..... ultimately at the expense of poetry (Martin 1978 :139).

It is true that some critics have complained against Larkin for the drearily prosaic quality and failure to strike an original poetic course. On the other hand some critics think that what is striking in Larkin is his preoccupation with small subjects and turning away from grandeur. To him the role of an outsider is preferable to a false commitment to anything. Honesty, however sad and unpleasant, is his cardinal virtue. Though dissatisfied with the present lot he is no rebel. Even rebellion is an empty romantic gesture for him. Instead he prefers to accept the reality of everyday life. Larkin's own life-perceptions and emotions, or experience and
thought, fit entirely, without any compromise into his poetry. And yet it is not encumbered by autobiography. There was no need of any large scale system of belief constructed within which to fashion his work of art.

Larkin wrote in a language immediately identifiable as the colloquial idiom of contemporary day, free from pedantry and grandiloquence. What saves him from the limitations of some of his contemporary poets, especially the Movement poets, is his occasional transcendence, without inappropriateness, of the ordinary and the commonplace. He has set poetry free to extol, and show in a new manner, the significance of the most ordinary thought and experience in our daily life. As such Larkin shows a profound understanding of, and deep compassion for, the dilemmas and sufferings of ordinary humanity. He rejects the gaudy products of imagination in favour of the decent and drab truth. Poetry to Larkin has always been an essentially natural form of expression, deeply rooted in common experience and born of deeply felt emotions. It is the ordinariness of his theme and style that convince the reader of the authenticity of his experience.

Larkin's poems then, in this sense, are small victories over the apparent ugliness and purposelessness of everyday life, moments when something important discloses itself beneath a mundane existence. So the main reason for Larkin's popularity is the obvious commonplaceness of his subjects. He highlights a personal concern for those things which personally concern most people in the modern world. He combines a sharp
contemporary relevance with universality, which appeal to the reader's sense not only of what life in the general is like, but what an individual's life was about in the contemporary world. The world of his poems is a world which most readers can respond to. And this is not a small achievement. It is not, as some critics believe, as parochial, as 'English.' His poetry has a significance that transcends the specifically English provincialism. His love for the ordinary and the commonplace, his resolute anti-heroic stance, staunchly defend his purpose.

The grounds on which the authenticity of Larkin's poetry lies is his image, among the critics, fellow-poets and readers. As the true spirit of mid-twentieth century, as one of the most important literary figures in post-war England, and as the voice of a whole generation. Perhaps only A. Alvarez has said something negative about this aspect of Larkin. To him this kind of poetry is an example of the "negative feedback of gentility, the English withdrawal from the profound forces of disintegration in twentieth-century" (Timms 1973: 73). What Alvarez suggests is true in the sense what Larkin represents is a loss of nerve or confidence, the lack of commitment due to a certain cosy satisfaction with social situation after the War. British intellectuals were more or less dissatisfied with the welfare state of Britain. Yet Larkin copes with the embarrassments of a peacetime welfare-state in the late-1940's and early '50's, in which idealistic credos seemed tawdry to the young generation at that moment.
Except Alvarez, most of the critics have praised Larkin as a man and a poet of his age. As early as 1965 critics spoke about him as "The best poet England now has." This opinion was reaffirmed by Alan Brownjohn when he claimed that:

Larkin has produced the most technically brilliant and resonantly beautiful, profoundly disturbing yet appealing and approachable body of verse of any English poet in the last twenty five years (King 1979 :1).

Larkin’s poetic identity as the spirit of mid-twentieth-century Britain, a spirit of disillusionment with the belief that the only ideal is to have no ideals to loose, is confirmed. His voice is taken as the voice of a troubled day. He has that power to make poetry out of material that might seem unpromising. He distills poetry from appurtenances of contemporary society with contemporary reality. His poetry embodies attitudes of heart and mind peculiarly characteristic of his time: doubt, insecurity, boredom, aimlessness and malaise. He voices most accurately and poignantly the spiritual desolation of a world in which people have discarded the last signs of religious faith which once gave meaning and hope to humanity. It is exact but curt, acute, unsentimental, savage and above all a sad anatomy of contemporary world and its people. Alun Jones rightly observes Larkin’s relevance as a prophet of the times when he says:

It is in the poetry of Philip Larkin that the spirit of the 1950s finds its most complete expression in English poetry (Kuby 1974 :11).

And Donald Davie discovers to Larkin’s tolerance of the ugliness in contemporary England due to his humanitarianism:

Larkin agrees to tolerate the intolerable for the sake of
human solidarity with those who don't find it intolerable at all (Hassan 1988:141).

The praise for being contemporaneous comes even from American critics who have normally criticized Larkin for his lack of nerve. For instance Louise Bogan comments:

This member (Larkin) of what is now becoming a middle-aged British poetic generation possesses formal gifts that are not only perfectly controlled and strongly sustained but capable of wide and interesting variation. He is able to use such gifts as they are seldom used, to describe the tough realities of his time (Timms 1973:92).

Larkin does not merely portray with great fidelity and skill the outward show of mid-twentieth-century life, but his poetry is the most faithful and most vivid reflection of the intellectual and emotional world in which he and his contemporaries lived. The reason for his popularity then lies in the definition he gave to a contemporary way of life whose means are no longer adequate to the inner needs of man. The helplessness of the individual as the most telling experience of the twentieth century socio-political dimension is perhaps most accurately rendered by Larkin. This is where Larkin's pessimism seems relevant.

Larkin's most significant achievement is perhaps his reader oriented body of verse. He has that rare gift of making the highly complex activity of poetry look so easy. Larkin has been quoted earlier, more than once, which shows his outright dislike for critics and academicians. His aim was to address himself to readers with a directness and eloquence which should have no need of the intermediary service of the critic. Larkin knew that the academicians can be particularly
destructive of that creative innocence or potential. He was aware of the separation between poet and audience, and tried his utmost throughout his career to bridge the gap.

It is generally taken for granted that the twentieth century critics and theoreticians have driven out the creative artist. This is supposed to be the age of the supremacy of criticism over poetry. Larkin has very ardently focussed the dilemma of poetry in the contemporary world. As criticism seems to have become more important than poetry, critics have gained ascendancy. The art of poetry is considered as minor. Larkin's greatest achievement is that he was capable of asserting the supremacy of poetry in such a situation.

Larkin's verse can be, and is, appreciated by a very wide range of readers. This does not mean that his poems are slight, simple and transparent. They are often complex, but not unnecessarily obscure. He has made his intentions clear for establishing a direct relationship with a wide reading public, and he has insisted that the audience at which he directs his poetry is that audience which reads it because it wants to, not that which reads because it has to. Poetry is in a healthy state when the poet has an ideal relationship with reality as well as his audience. Larkin compromises neither with reality nor his audience.

Larkin was praised not only by senior poets like Eliot, Auden and Betjeman, but also by the next generation of poets. He has been an important influence on several younger and good poets.
to come after him. Roy Fuller, Ted Hughes have recorded their great admiration for Larkin. In Anthony Thwaite, George Macbeth, Philip Hobsbaum, Douglas Dunn one can trace Larkin’s influence. In spite of the considerable differences, many younger poets take Larkin as an example of literary decorum. Clive James, Christopher Ricks, Alan Brownjohn, several minor poets and important critics have highlighted some important aspects of Larkin. Philip Hobsbaum has explicitly stated:

Round about 1950, in the worst doldrums English verse has ever known, Larkin was the first poet to write poems that looked like poetry: that had shape, plot, scene, argument, and yet were incontestably of our time (Timms 1973:90).

Andrew Motion, too has said:

It’s hard to say how deeply Larkin’s poems have influenced my own. No doubt very. He has certainly helped me more than anyone else to clarify the kind of poetry I want to write, and been marvellous company, often profound, and sometimes extremely funny (Thwaite 1982:68).

It is no small achievement to be praised by three generations. Here lies Larkin’s authenticity.

Larkin has avoided literary functions and socialization. His seclusion or hermit-like life style is well known. He has never craved for awards and fame, nor has he complained against the late recognition. When Betjeman became the poet Laureate, he wrote to Peter Levi that it should have been Larkin. Though Larkin and Betjeman were good friends and shared many opinions and preoccupations, when the time came Larkin declined the offer. This is taken as a significant difference between them. However, Larkin got his mead and recognition more as a public or unofficial poet laureate.

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Other awards, honours and recognitions that came to Larkin were many. For instance he was awarded by Germany the Shakespeare prize in 1976, The Arts Council Award, a Fellowship at All Souls Oxford, and Honorary Doctorates from Queen’s University (Belfast), and other universities like Leicester, Warwick, St. Andrews, Sussex and above all Oxford: quite an achievement for a man and a poet with diminished eyesight and limited range.

Larkin has carefully cultivated and posed himself as a sharply characterized public persona. Of a man who never read foreign literature and hated alien lands, who distrusted the academia, shy of company, suspicious of myths, traditions and romanticism, bored, selfish, provincial, agnostic, extremely funny and witty, and above all pessimistic. A greater part of Larkin’s appeal is the presence within the poems of the poet himself. The impression one gets of the poet is precise and detailed. He presents himself as a novelist would present a character. The poet, as an individual, to whom experience forms the basis for a general truth. The whole address of Larkin’s poems to the reader is that of a vivid and actual being. The poet’s life is in itself an art. Larkin’s style and content just come from what he was. Individual though Larkin is, he reflects common experiences and common concerns. He has no easy answers, and yet he does not wallow in the fashionable ‘Angst.’

As far as public concerns go, his attitude is conservative and reactionary. He has constructed no system in particular into
which his poems can fit. He believed that a poet must write
only about that which he feels deeply. Inflated feelings or
rhetoric are to be avoided. For Larkin, poetry is a way of
being honest. It is the record of the poet’s recovery of his
authentic response to experience. This we may call as the
empirical attitude. Larkin was never seduced by fashionable
notions of what a poet should be, or what he should write.

It is difficult to make any final and conclusive remarks about
Larkin as a man or as a poet for the reason that he was
evasive by temperament due to which he has made contradictory
remarks about himself and his art. The second reason is that
the critics too are divided in their opinions. Amidst such
contradictions an attempt is made here to highlight his
pessimism as not the only but the most dominant strain in his
poetry, as in his own view of life. Larkin’s poetry, though it
constantly speaks about the unpleasant or darker aspect of
life, is a consummately crafted verse. His poetry is
constantly caught between the impossibility of facing reality
and the greater hurdle of indulging in wishful dreams. It’s
essentially a poetry of disappointment, of the destruction of
romantic illusions of man’s defeat by time and man’s own
inadequacies. It is true that, despite all his own and others’
claims for his honesty, simplicity, empirical attitude, he is
a complex man. The only consoling thing about Larkin is the
quality of his art. Rather than technically complex, his poems
are emotionally complex, and one need not look for
philosophical concerns in his poetry. He was a disciplined

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poet with a numerous variety of tone and attitude. He reinforces rather than repeats his thematic concerns. He wrote the least didactic poetry and believed from first to last that the primary aim of poetry should be to give pleasure, even when they articulate unpleasant or sad things. His poetry is despair made beautiful. He is the veteran of darkness. Pure, optimistic writing has, somehow, a hollow ring to it in this age. Bitterness is a creative force in Larkin, and so in a way pessimism becomes the exploration of reality. Larkin's strength is disillusionment which made him keep his vision clear and emotions restrained. The relevant question, regarding Larkin's poetry may be asked: "How well is this done?" rather than "Is this right?" This leads to the further question of technique that becomes a living morality for Larkin. To him poetry is an image, not an argument. It never asks anybody to do anything, or to think anything, or be anything.

On the plus side, the affirmative aspects in Larkin are the ritual offer of comfort in the face of time's encroachment and death. The Romantic impulse in Larkin is found in the shape of his sensitivity to beauty and mystery in nature, in the past of a country and community, and of the existing world. Some poems do glimmer with the thought of a beyond, and an utopia of ordered hope. Such poems seem to hold out the promise of a longed for escape. But for all his love for English traditions, literary, moral, social, political or religious, he is at times skeptical about them. As man can no longer live

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by these, he must face the sad reality of twentieth century rootlessness. Larkin attempts to be modern (or postmodern) without ceasing to be traditional. He constantly reminds the reader that to worthily continue a tradition is as difficult as to invent one. There are few rays of hope or optimism in Larkin but it all becomes dim under his predominant bleakness or pessimism.

Finally what Larkin said about John Betjeman is equally true of himself:

Betjeman is serious: his subjects are serious, and the fact that his tone can be light or ambivalent should not deceive us into thinking he does not treat them seriously. His texture is a subtle, a constant flickering between solemn and comic, self-mockery and self-expression, he offers us, indeed, something we cannot find in any other writer, a gaiety, a sense of the ridiculous (Whalen 1986:13).

Perhaps the best comment on Larkin as a man and poet, comes from Kingsley Amis when he says:

The seemingly trivial base from which so many poems of Larkin spring; the poems, like life itself, sneak up on the reader through seemingly unedifying details. It is this apparent unimportance of subject and details which makes the poems emotionally and morally authentic (Kuby 1974:140).

Larkin may not be a great poet, but he certainly was a good one. This is not a small achievement. No doubt Larkin will be seen in future in a broader context. Critics like Barbara Everett and Andrew Motion have already noticed new grounds in Larkin. As in the past few years, Larkin will, in the future, create a lively debate around himself as a man and as a poet.