



ISSN: 0975-833X

## REVIEW ARTICLE

### AGNOSTICISM IN LARKIN'S POETRY

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#### ARTICLE INFO

##### Article History:

Received 28<sup>th</sup> February, 2014  
Received in revised form  
19<sup>th</sup> March, 2014  
Accepted 08<sup>th</sup> April, 2014  
Published online 31<sup>st</sup> May, 2014

##### Key words:

Religion,  
Agnosticism,  
Skepticism,  
Church,  
Ambivalent.

#### ABSTRACT

'The Movement' poetry was a new poetic build upon the old, emphasizing transparency, rational impassivity, and formal perfection with Philip Larkin as its poetic exemplar. His poetry anticipates on telling the truth about life as it is and signifies the voice of an accumulated experience of Larkin as a poet and Larkin as a person of the time. Most of his poems show the poet's ambivalent attitude towards religion, which was also the general attitude of the time. As he examines various sacramental motifs in his poems, he muses on how they once provided humanity with ideas and objects invoking the reality of transcendent meaning. The connotations of the words in Larkin's poems are used to disarm the skeptical reader of his own skepticism for long enough to persuade him to admit the necessity and legitimacy of metaphysical speculation. This paper aims to show the agnostic-self of the poet persistent in some of his poems.

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#### INTRODUCTION

Religion was for Larkin an emotive self-delusion, a "vast moth-eaten musical brocade / Created to pretend we never die" (CP 208). His agnostic views were rather the outcome of the age. In the post-war era, there was general waning in Christian values and ideals. Conflict between Roman Catholics and Protestants in England extinguished Christian faith in the minds of the followers. In spite of his own rejection of religious faith on a personal level, Larkin identifies the human need for affirmation, placing him with other modern spiritual 'nay-sayers' like Nietzsche, Kafka, Conrad, and Camus. In this general drift of non-religion, Larkin became an agnostic. Larkin's famous poem "Church Going," taken from the collection *The Less Deceived*, in particular call to mind the state akin to the existentialist's agnosticism. This representative poem is ambivalent about religion. The speaker is a prototype of the average Welfare State Englishman, overworked and underpaid, curious about the Church, but ignorant about the "brass and stuff / Up at the holy end," (CP 97) or about "rood lofts," unbelieving, but attracted by the "tense, musty, unignorable silence, / Brewed God knows how long." The poem discusses the futility and the utility of going to a Church. The discussion is half-mocking and half-serious. "Church Going" (CP 97) is a monologue in which the speaker frankly appears as an agnostic if not as a downright atheist. As Larkin himself was a sceptic or an agnostic, we are justified in thinking that the speaker in the poem is Larkin himself.

According to the speaker, we are on the verge of an apocalypse when people would stop going to Churches altogether, because they would have lost their faith in God and in divine worship. Then a time is also coming when people's disbelief in God and their superstitions would come to an end too: "But superstition, like belief, must die, / And what remains when disbelief has gone?" (CP 98). Eventually, however, some people might still drop in to the decayed and disused church buildings on account of some inner compulsion or to derive some insight from the vista of the many graves in the churchyard:

Since someone will forever be surprising  
A hunger in himself to be more serious,  
And gravitating with it to this ground,  
Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in,  
If only that so many dead lie round. (CP 98)

He introduces religion on his own terms, speaking as someone devoid of faith, and as someone trying to recuperate the comfort which faith used to bestow in the past. Larkin's use of sacramental motifs in the poem demonstrates his latent Christian belief. The meditation begins as a passing bicyclist pauses for a few awkward moments inside a small empty church. At first his thoughts make it just "another church" (CP 97) filled with religious relics: "little books," a "small neat organ," "parchment, plate and pyx." Although there is nothing particular or noteworthy about the church, the fact it is a religious place filled with sacramental associations leads him into a whimsical act of respect: "Hatless, I take off / My cycle-clips in awkward reverence." Nevertheless, a vein of irony runs through the poem when he bestows an Irish sixpence.

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Larkin's interview with Ian Hamilton reveals that "Church Going" is an entirely secular poem. He further denied that this poem, his most extended treatment of religion, was in any sense itself religious: It is of course an entirely secular poem. I was a bit irritated by an American who insisted to me it was a religious poem. It isn't religious at all. Religious surely means that the affairs of this world are under divine surveillance (sic), and so on, and I go to some pains to point out that I don't bother about that kind of thing, that I'm deliberately ignorant of it -- "Up at the holy end," for instance. (qtd. in Hamilton 73) In fact, Ian Hamilton is quite precise in thinking that the first stanzas heighten up and systematically deflate the prior attitudes taken up by the speaker. Though the poem is not religious, it is about going to church, as the title suggests, and Blake Morrison is quite right in devoting several pages to it as a long poem about belief. It is, as Larkin says, about "the union of the important stages of human life -- birth, marriage, and death -- that going to church represents" (CP 98). Larkin, after providing us tags and pointers to his ambivalent attitude, modulates his poem into a grand ending. The grandeur of this final stanza beginning, "A serious house on serious earth it is" (CP 98), sharply contrasts with the irreverence and flippant tone of the earlier ones. The poem, thus, embraces two contrasting attitudes; refuses to commit itself to either, and is thus ironic in its attitude to experience. Much the same point echoes in "The Building" (CP 191). Like "Church Going," it is set in a post-Christian era, at least from the speaker's point of view. When he looks down from the hospital room, he sees a stubbornly "locked church" (CP 192). Religion is closed to him -- it can do nothing to bring the world's "love" and "chances" within reach, and cannot provide comfort, as it once did, in the face of death:

[. . .] Then, past the gate,  
Traffic; a locked church; short terraced streets  
Where kids chalk games, and girls with hair-dos fetch  
Their separates from the cleaners -- O world,  
Your loves, your chances, are beyond the stretch  
Of any hand from here! (CP 192)

But, in place of what he has called, in "Aubade" (CP 208) Christianity's "vast moth-eaten musical brocade," Larkin hesitantly, provides two consolations. The first is the hospital itself. By admitting that "its powers" (CP 193) at least have the potential to "Outbuild cathedrals" and contravene "the coming dark," he chronicles the legitimacy of hope at the same time rejects the support of the church. The visitors who come each evening "with wasteful, weak, propitiatory flowers" signify the second consolation. These offerings are as ambiguous as the building itself. The poem discloses a stoic acceptance of death and is rich in religious undertones. It sees the whole of life and death in terms of a busy hospital, which is the place of life's beginning and end. All are in the hospital "to confess that something has gone wrong" (CP 191). This replacement of the church's role is a final sham that man plays upon himself in a secular, rational age. Here we are reminded of the "serious house on serious earth" of "Church Going" (CP 97). Even this reversal of roles cannot soothe or help a person from dying. The hope, of course, is not that death will be eternally withheld from the "unseen congregations" (CP 192) of patients, but they will have the time and suitable circumstances to prepare

themselves to meet it. The subject of religion constantly evokes from Larkin a sympathetic, yet half-playful stance as in the poem "Water" (CP 93) where the poet gravely considers an invitation to establish a new religion, or to create a religion, from scratch: "If I were called in / To construct a religion / I should make use of water." In the new religion that he would "construct," a prominent role would be allocated to the images of baptism and rebirth. However, these images remain rather cheerful and funny, including "a furious devout drench," and culminating in a vision of clarity yet multiplicity: "A glass of water / Where any-angled light / Would congregate endlessly." This poem offers an intentionally detached, unemotional view of religion, and, perhaps, constitutes something close to Larkin's ideal in the matter. It combines a certain amount of whimsicality with veneration, and remains un-encumbered by fonts, rood-lofts, buttresses, starved choirs, and other significant religious symbols which connect the church with tradition, and with a sense of nationalism. Here all the traditional religious symbols -- purification, renewal, life-giving force, the East as the home of most religions -- are utilized. Even then, the poet declares that he would still wish to make water central to any religion, if he may be called upon to construct, though the water may not be from a river, but only that which flows out of taps, and without sacramental value. Larkin here, invents his own latent pagan creed. In the place of God, his religion places the neatly concentrated and totally non-human elements of nature, with no spiritual, moral, or emotional content, quite unrelated to human values: the free, endless play of "any-angled" (CP 93) light in water. The poet also advises people not to go to church but as in pagan conviction pay their homage to the sun with the help of water. This shows his aversion for many modern religious practices of churches in England, but expresses a fondness for conventional Christianity. "Water" restates his strong dislike for "church going" and suggests the worship of God through water-offering to the sun just as the Hindus do. Another agnostic poem of Larkin's is "Faith Healing" (CP 126) where the evangelist faith healer is expected to remedy maladies. The poet chortles at the blind faith of women who come to the evangelist for consolation. It is also a spoof on people who claim that they possess special powers that enable them to have direct contact with God and can conjure relief for the suffering, and has a commercial tone about it: "Upright in rimless glasses, silver hair, dark suit, white collar." In his dress, manners, speech, and his profit-making, he is a "packaged priest" whose cynicism is as deep as his manipulation. A tone of mockery is again heard when Larkin suggests that the faith-healing ceremony lasts "some twenty-seconds." He attributes no divine power in the evangelist's words, but his words have aroused in these women a desire to give love and to receive love. This desire has melted the hearts of the women and brings them relief from their troubles and anxieties and the hope that they would soon begin to live healthy and happy lives. Thus, Larkin suggests that faith-healing is a deception practiced on the aggrieved women, who substitute divine love for the human love which they have missed till then.

When the persona shifts from description to meditation in the last stanza, he rhetorically echoes the healer's question: "What's wrong" (CP 126) with the answer: "all's wrong." That

is, he believes, what moves these women forward to the healer, and not faith, neither theirs nor the healer's. But, instead, they become moved because "In everyone there sleeps / A sense of life lived according to love." The sacramental impact of the healer's touch is only momentary. Larkin himself did not believe in any kind of faith healing. He was an agnostic who did not find it possible either to believe in the existence of God or to deny God's existence. In the last year of his life he experienced intense pain and anguish which he vividly expressed in "Aubade" (CP 208). With committed Christians Larkin would squabble that he did not have the consolation which religion gave them in the face of death. Yet he envied those who had faith, and ardently wished he too could embrace it. In "High Windows" (CP 165), the poet gives an account of a picture of modern England, specially the behaviour of young men and young women. He observes that the generation before his own was the one that followed religious customs and reticence, and men in that generation were not much sexually motivated, but the present society is very much prone to sexual indulgence. However, the real tone of the poem is that Larkin welcomes the modern sovereignty in love matters and accepts the fast disappearing religious inhibitions from the modern society. The protagonist (or he himself) feels wedged in a certain atheistic or agnostic position which he feels is hard-won and necessary, and yet which seems somewhat unsatisfactory. Larkin's satire seems apt as he notes that now eternal bliss is no longer reserved for the faithful as a heavenly reward. In "Church Going" (CP 97) and "The Building" (CP 191), as in "The Explosion" (CP 175), Larkin looks to accustomed social and natural rituals for the stimulation that might formerly have come from the church. In other poems, he ponders on the rewards of the natural world more exclusively - but, as "At Grass" (CP 29) or "Forget What Did" (CP 184) illustrate, they provide an equivalently ambiguous comfort. "The Trees" (CP 166) is another instance. It denies that nature allows people to believe in their immortality. Nevertheless, this denial provokes the same susceptibility as that produced by lack of faith in orthodox religion, there are positive aspects as well. In spite of their steady increasing age, the trees do at least "seem" to return unchanged each year; and provoke the speaker to follow their example and commence his life "afresh." In "Aubade" (CP 208) Larkin portrays religion as simply a futile endeavor to transcend death:

This is a special way of being afraid  
No trick dispels. Religion used to try,  
That vast moth-eaten musical brocade.  
Created to pretend we never die. (CP 208)

However, despite his dismissal of the large claims of religion, he remains a secular rather than an atheistic-poet. He is unreligious rather than anti-religious. This is a crucial distinction and essential to the universal appeal of his elegiac poems. He has no anger against God for not existing, nor does he formulate the kind of atheistic spirituality found in the works of A.E. Housman or Stevie Smith. He is reluctant to circumscribe the appeal of his works by picking quarrels with particular religious beliefs, or championing atheistic philosophy. Rather he simply refuses to "bother about that kind of thing." Religious beliefs arouse his compassion rather than his anger. Religion, in his work, is seen as another of the pathetic ideals by which we live, a beautiful but vain delusion. Such a delusion however, together with his lifelong conservatism led to the clergyman who gave the address at his funeral to call him a "reluctant disbeliever," which is perhaps not a wholly inaccurate choice of words. However, he was never an earnest seeker after truth and the unflinching scepticism of poems such as "Church Going" (CP 97) and "An Arundel Tomb" (CP 110), is far indeed from the sentimental religiosity for which it is sometimes mistaken. There is often a tension in his poetry between his desire for a quasi-religious experience and his sense that life is a mess. His is a secular voice crying in the wilderness, suspicious yet longing for the mysterious, the mystical, and the sacramental.

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