

Home and Homelessness: Crisis of Existence in Philip Larkin's Poetry

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Abstract

A great deal of Philip Larkin's poetry suffers from a tension between belonging with and estrangement from home. Larkin's writing career flourished at a time in the mid-20th century when British thought and feeling underwent tremendous changes due to the Second World War. Larkin, England's Unofficial Poet Laureate, remains tied to regional or national identities throughout his life. Larkin is often called a poet of Englishness. Larkin's protagonists are somewhat constitutive of the poet's own personality. Larkin persona fails to feel a sense of belonging to his childhood hometown Coventry when he returns there after a decade because it creates in him no nostalgia. The place where he was born and grew up does not have any impact on his memory and thus he feels estranged from his former existence. Larkin moved from one place to another as he held the posts of librarian in different colleges or universities. For Larkin 'nowhere is really home to me', as he wrote to Monica Jones after living in Hull for fifteen years. Larkin refused to be bound by belonging to his place of temporary staying. Belonging to a place is not necessarily a choice for Larkin but often an unavoidable option. For a Larkin speaker possessing a rented room, which is nothing but 'one hired box', causes in him a crisis of belonging. This paper will aim to explore Larkin's ambivalent feelings of belonging and non-belonging towards home in some of his poems.

Keywords: *belonging, existence, home, homelessness, non-belonging.*

Introduction

Philip Larkin's poetry is said to have grown from his strong sense of place. He values English culture and emphasises the importance of belonging to his culture. He hates anything that threatens English culture. Edna Longley examines Larkin's preoccupation with home in her essay 'Larkin, Decadence and the Lyric Poem': 'Home as England, England as home, take colour from both clusters of meaning. England and home positively coincide when conditions are right for some kind of emotional or spiritual assent to the national being' (Booth, 2000, p. 44). But Larkin's attitude towards home is ambivalent. His feelings of belonging to and estrangement from home are perhaps derived from his itinerant librarianship in different colleges and universities, and also from the 'mismatch' marriage of his parents who 'are incessantly opposed' to each other (Motion, 1993, p. 82). Throughout his life he was a homeless itinerant. He held the post of Librarian for three years (1943-46) in the Public Library at Wellington, a small town in Shropshire; four years (1946-50) as an

Assistant Librarian at University College, Leicester; five years (1950-55) as a Sub-Librarian at Queen's University, Belfast and nearly thirty years until his death in 1985 as a Librarian at the University of Hull. Though Larkin spent the entire second half of his life in Hull and for which he is called the 'hermit of Hull', he finds 'nowhere is really home to me', as he wrote to his lifelong companion Monica Jones (Booth, 2010, p. 400). Having spent almost his entire life in rented room Larkin developed a sense of ambiguity towards home. For Larkin home is fragile. Longley adds further, "Home", a word that hovers between the personal and cultural, is always problematic in Larkin's poetry . . . It is more often an 'unsatisfactory' familial locus' (Booth, 2000, p. 44). Throughout his working life as a librarian he continued to return home from exile every few weeks. Larkinesque characters are also forever in transit in many a poem. In his recent book, *Philip Larkin: Letters Home 1936-1977*, James Booth (2018) remarks cogently, 'He [Larkin] had left home but he never 'got away' from it. This paradox is one key to the greatness of his poetry' (p. 46). For Larkin, the more charming abroad seems, the more homely England becomes in contrast. Janice Rossen (1989) asserts, '. . . one's home defines one's identity, and the presence of this idea in his poetry explains Larkin's appeal to his readers in his role of 'Unofficial Laureate'' (p. 65).

'I Remember, I Remember'

The occasion of 'I Remember, I Remember', which was published in *The Less Deceived* (1955), is Larkin's visit to his place of birth, Coventry. The poem was written a few days (8 January, 1954) later Larkin had spent the Christmas vacation in 1953 with his mother in Loughborough. A train journey through Coventry becomes the occasion for Larkin's travelling protagonist to recollect his childhood memories in an unglamorous way. During that time Larkin had been in Northern Ireland for his librarian job in Queen's University, Belfast. The Larkin persona was going to England by train which was running not through the usual route in a new year; 'Coming up England by a different line/ For once, early in the cold new year' (Larkin, 1988, p. 81). While the train stopped at Coventry, home town of his childhood, he could well remember, "I was born here" and looked 'for a sign/ That this was still the town that had been 'mine'' [my emphasis *mine*] (Larkin, 1988, p. 81). But while trying to look out the window for familiar landmarks he 'wasn't even clear/ Which side was which' (Larkin, 1988, p. 81). On being asked by his travelling companion, may be the speaker's alter ego, if the city they are passing through is where he has his 'roots', the speaker replies with a serious note of estrangement: 'No, only where my childhood was unspent' (Larkin, 1988, p. 81). As if Coventry is not his hometown where he belonged to, but it was just the place from where he started his life. What he can remember is his non-existent childhood which, by his own utterance, 'was unspent'. So as an internal exile his sense of deracination, which he still harbours towards Coventry, is asserted, '. . . just where I started' (Larkin, 1988, p. 81). According to John Osborne (2008), '. . . the use of the word 'England' in the opening line, far from conveying a sense of belonging, momentarily holds out the prospect that the narrator is foreign' (p. 135). His childhood devoid of any romantic excitement is filled with uneventful emptiness. The fragmentary recollections of his vacuous childhood exclude any romantically inflated notion of childhood celebrated in popular literature.

For the protagonist nothing of particular interest happened in Coventry. Though garden, family, bracken and all that stuff existed, they had no use to him. He 'wasn't spoken to by an old hat', never sought refuge in their 'splendid family' when he 'got depressed'. The family

had 'Their [not *our*] comic [ludicrous-looking] Ford, their [not *our*] farm, where I could be/ 'Really myself' . . . The bracken where I never trembling sat' (Larkin, 1988, p. 81). The speaker could 'really be himself' somewhere else, not in Coventry. 'From the poem's beginning he evinces a desperate need for a sense of belonging somewhere' (Martin, 1978, p. 70). His not being 'really himself' is not only his disappointment with his particular childhood in Coventry but also with his existence as a whole. So when his companion wittily comments, 'You look as if you wished the place in Hell', the Larkinesque character admits candidly: 'I suppose it's not the place's fault' (Larkin, 1988, p. 82). We may presume that the 'fault' is his own, 'the weakness is not in being at home but in being Philip Larkin', as Richard Hoffpauir (1991) states (p. 274). The speaker's prolific use of negatives nullifies his belonging to his native city. His recollection contains what did not happen in his childhood rather than what happened. David Timms (1973) examines that in this poem Larkin 'reflects on his childhood, recalling everything that did *not* happen' (p. 3). The sequence of negations is heightened in the final tail-line: 'Nothing, like something, happens anywhere' (Larkin, 1988, p. 82). Nothing like what happened in his childhood in Coventry happens anywhere. In assessing the poem Peter Hollindale comments, 'Its subject is typical of Larkin: emptiness, non-occurrence, not-being. It describes a childhood which didn't happen' (Cookson and Loughery, 1989, p. 51). The title also accentuates in ironic tone what the speaker cannot remember rather than what he can remember. Larkin himself 'forgot' everything about his childhood as he told in an interview with Miriam Gross in the *Observer*: 'Oh, I've completely forgotten it [childhood] . . . It was perhaps not a very sophisticated childhood . . .' (Larkin, 1983, p. 47). But in Larkin's recent biography Richard Bradford (2005) reflects, 'Larkin usually recalled his childhood with a mixture of feigned forgetfulness and irritation at being obliged, through fame, to speak of it at all' (p. 23). From a different perspective Adam Piette (2013), in his article 'Childhood Wiped Out: Larkin, His Father, and the Bombing of Coventry', suggests that bombing on Coventry (Coventry was in fact heavily bombed during the Second World War) 'annulled Larkin's relation to Coventry as precisely his father's city' (p. 234). Later Larkin wrote in a letter to Maeve Brennan, Larkin's colleague and a 'close friend' at the University of Hull, about the damage wrought to their 'home' by the Coventry air raids: 'Our house has gone – just scooped out of the earth' (Thwaite, 1992, p. 485).

'Poetry of Departures'

In 'Poetry of Departures', written on 23 January, 1954 when Larkin was in Belfast and appeared in *The Less Deceived*, the protagonist's ambivalence towards home is poignantly concentrated: he is attracted to that (read *homely life*) which he affects to despise. The poem hinges on the choice between leaving home and adhering to secured life at home. The speaker overhears a 'fifth-hand' voice that someone, in quest for an ideal existence, has deserted his current existence at home: '*He chucked up everything/ And just cleared off*' (Larkin, 1988 p. 85). His longing for leaving home behind for an alternative existence on the open road is expressed by his bold assertion: 'We all hate home/ And having to be there:/ I detest my room' (Larkin, 1988, p. 85). The news of '*He walked out on the whole crowd/ Leaves me [the narrator] flushed and stirred*' (Larkin, 1988, p. 85) for it offers him an imaginative existence which contrasts the stark reality of life at home. But the lurking suspicion of the hearsay provokes him to confess, 'This audacious, purifying,/ Elemental move' (Larkin, 1988, p. 85). So he is not sure whether to overthrow his quotidian existence at home or to stick to it as articulated by asking himself, 'Surely I can, if he did?' (Larkin, 1988, p. 85). Rossen

(1989) maintains, 'The important point is not the question of which course the poet [the speaker] will choose, as this is a foregone conclusion, but that his dissatisfaction is cast in terms of a stark set of choices' (p. 134).

The narrator's longing to escape home clashes against the necessity to stay. His feeling of existential crisis results from his disparagement of vulnerable choice. For the speaker choosing one option excludes the possibility of other option, and thereby limits his freedom. Preferring the life of an escapist to a conformist's life at home leads the speaker to feel 'Sober and industrious' (Larkin, 1988, p. 85). The prospect of abandoning home fills him with the juvenile thrill, '*Then she undid her dress/ Or Take that you bastard*' (Larkin, 1988, p. 85). Daring escape involves two pictures of imagined alternative existence: 'swagger the nut-strewn roads,/ Crouch in the fo'c'sle/ Stubbly with goodness' (Larkin, 1988, p.85). Both pictures provide a perfect foil for the speaker's life at home with 'The good books, the good bed,/ And my life, in perfect order' (Larkin, 1988, p. 85). While life away from home is 'a life/ Reprehensibly perfect' and will require his attempt 'To create an object' (Larkin, 1988, p. 86). Such a life of adventurous freedom is projected onto the ideal existence and is reduced

to be 'artificial', 'a deliberate step backwards' (Larkin, 1988, p. 85). The title appropriately points out there is no 'poetry' or 'romance' in 'departures' from stay-at-home existence. The italicized lines stand remote from the rest of the poem, suggesting a never-attaining possibility for the narrator. The speaker's ultimate choice of staying at home rather than opting for a life of hackneyed adventure confirms his individual self over the masses. His individual inner self is not lost in the anonymous crowd. Overcoming the crowd he achieves his authentic being. By overthrowing the crowd the speaker proclaims, though self-justifyingly, that he will not cut and run for an unreal perfection of alternative ways of living. Being a part of the crowd a person, Soren Kierkegaard (1849/2001) examines, 'does not dare to believe in himself, finds it too venturesome a thing to be himself, far easier and safer to be like the others, to become an imitation, a number, a cipher in the crowd' (p. 303). By exercising his choice the narrator asserts his individual identity. In this respect the Larkin speaker follows the Sartrean choice. In his existentialist text *Being and Nothingness* Jean-Paul Sartre (1943/1992) writes, '. . . for human reality, to be is to *choose oneself*; nothing comes to it either from the outside or from within which it can receive or accept' (p. 440).

'Mr Bleany'

Living most of his life in rented accommodation Larkin could not help but feel a strong sense of rootlessness out of which emerged 'Mr Bleany', the second poem in *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964). The poem was written a few days after Larkin arrived in Hull in 1955 when the Hull University primarily arranged digs for him. It was on the first floor of Holtby House, a student residence in Cottingham, a village on the northern side of Hull. Later Larkin wrote Judy Egerton, whom he befriended while staying in Belfast, the accommodation 'is *not* suitable: small, barefloored and noisy: I feel as if I were lying in some penurious doss-house at night, with hobos snoring and quarrelling all round me' (Thwaite, 1992, p. 237). 'Mr Bleany' is occasioned by the Larkin speaker's possession of a rented room vacated recently by the previous lodger, Mr Bleany. The dingy room is redolent of Bleany's despicable life: the curtains are short, 'thin and frayed/ Fall to within five inches of the sill' (Larkin, 1988, p. 102); low-wattage bulb ('sixty-watt'); 'fusty bed'; 'saucer-souvenir'

formed a makeshift ash-tray and above all the room is confined ('no room for books or bags'). The poem begins with

the landlady's announcement, "This was Mr Bleany's room. He stayed/ The whole time he was at the Bodies, till/ They moved him" (Larkin, 1988, p. 102). From the speaker's observation of the claustrophobic atmosphere of the room it is revealed that Bleany's scanty belongings shapes his attitude towards existence. Salem K. Hassan (1988) observes, 'Mr Bleany's existence, without meaning as it is, becomes a problem to which he finds no solution other than nihilism' (P. 45). Besides referring to the 'car bodies' 'the Bodies' connotes our physical bodies the tenancy of which terminates with death. Mr Bleany's removing from 'the Bodies' reinforces the effective ending of his life. The little incidentals of his existence is strongly suggestive of the meagre substance of his habits: 'That how we live measures our own nature' (Larkin, 1988, p. 103). He played the football polls without winning ever, spent summer holidays always at the same resort with 'the Frinton folk' and Christmas in Stoke with his sister. The lineaments of Bleany's life is marked by a feeling of nothingness. His existence in the rented room is suffused with this nothingness. The meagre contents of both Bleany's routine and the lodging suggest he deserves 'no more to show/ Than one hired box should make him pretty sure' because 'He warranted no better' (Larkin, 1988, p. 103). Bleany's low-keyed existence in 'one hired box' (associated with coffins) is like death-in-life. For Bleany living in a home for hire is a reminder of the limited amount of time at his disposal. His time-bound existence in the rented room is constituent of death-in-life. The existential philosopher Martin Heidegger (1927/1958) writes 'Death is not something not yet present-at-hand, nor is it that which is ultimately still outstanding but which has been reduced to a minimum. *Death is something that stands before us – something impending*' (pp. 293-94).

Besides describing graphically the barrenness of both the room and Mr Bleany's life the first five stanzas, through the narration of the landlady, invoke the speaker's implied similarity to the eponymous character. Taking possession of the room of the previous tenant the speaker proves that he is no better than Mr Bleany. Though the speaker affects to despise Mr Bleany he is in fact Mr Bleany's double. It is not Mr Bleany who 'stood and watched the frigid wind/ Tousling the clouds, lay on the fusty bed/ Telling himself that this was home' (Larkin, 1988, p. 102), but the speaker who is stepping into Mr Bleany's shoes. The speaker admits candidly, 'So it happens that I lie/ Where Mr Bleany lay, and stub my fags/ On the

same saucer-souvenir' (Larkin, 1988, p. 102). They are fellow-sufferers: both of them suffer from homelessness. Having no home of their own they, Larkin included, have to depend upon the hospitality of others. Andrew Swarbrick (1995) points out, 'For Mr Bleany, 'this was home' and there is no 'elsewhere' to underwrite his alienation from it, the 'hired box' of his life' (P. 98). Being identified by the 'one hired box' of the rented room Mr Bleany and the speaker are easily interchangeable. They 'hire' room rather than owning it, and so each of them fails to develop a sense of belonging to it. Towards the end of the poem the third-person pronoun merges with the first-person pronoun, revealing more about the speaker than he is aware of himself. What comes out at the end is the speaker's mockery and contempt aiming at himself. He becomes the victim of his own mockery.

'Home is so Sad'

In 'Home is so Sad', which was also published in *The Whitsun Weddings*, the home evokes in the mother-narrator a sense of emptiness and desolation when she looks at it after her son's departure. The poem distils sadness which Larkin practically felt when he came from Pearson Park, Hull to see his mother in Loughborough during the Christmas holiday in 1958. Larkin's official biographer Andrew Motion (1993) wrote about the composition of the poem:

His [Larkin's] mother's house preserves all the odds and ends . . . which represent the original good intentions of a couple making a home together. But all that remains of their 'joyous shot at how things ought to be' is faded hope. What will survive of us, the poem says, is not love but the wish to love – and indelible signs of how the wish has been frustrated. (p. 290)

But here the speaker is not the son but the mother. After her son has left the home, she does not feel as 'comfort' as when her son was there. Through the assertion – 'Home is so sad' -- at the very outset of the poem it is revealed that the poem is more about the sadness in which the speaker is deeply engrossed than merely about the home itself. The speaker vents her own profound sadness onto the home which is now abandoned and subjected to decay by time. The home is no longer 'joyous' but represents the mother's frustrated hopes and nostalgia. Of particular poignancy is the home now 'Long fallen wide' (Larkin, 1988, p. 119). The home being stripped off its inhabitants is no longer alive.

The intention of making a home with all the odds and ends – 'the pictures and the cutlery./ The music in the piano stool. That vase' (Larkin, 1988, p. 119) – is now a faded hope. The furnishings of the home evoke in her a sense of hopelessness. Both the home and its domestic interior tend to be transitory existence like human life. They will have the same human fate. 'The pathos of humanity is significantly made visible in the scoriae of the objects in the home' (Whalen, 1986, p. 27). The loneliness of the home is poignantly exemplified by the image of empty vase. Having no flowers the vase is purposeless. So is the home without its inhabitants. The home seems to have lost its identity just as each and every physical object in the home remains useless. 'Here a familiar domestic interior stands as the tragic symbol of the transience of human aspiration' (Booth, 2005, p. 161). The mother's existential crisis is deepened as she feels the inevitable gap between her desire and its fulfilment. Robbing of its inhabitants from the home is a kind of 'theft' to the speaker. So "'bereft/ Of anyone to please' the home is 'Having no heart' to 'turn again to what it started as,/ A joyous shot at how things ought to be' (Larkin, 1988, p.119). Her attempts to make it 'home' will ultimately fail as she, like everybody else, grows old and will die.

'The Importance of Elsewhere'

'The Importance of Elsewhere', which appeared in Larkin's same volume of poetry, overtly refers to the poet's stay in Ireland. The poem was composed three months later Larkin left the post of Sub-Librarian at Queen's University of Belfast, Northern Ireland. Though Ireland is located in the British Isles, Larkin felt '. . . he was always a stranger, with a stranger's right to be considered 'separate' . . . After five years of self-imposed exile, his sense of nationality and nationhood began to sharpen' (Motion, 1993, p. 264). Larkin's paradoxical attitude to home – the duality of belonging to and estrangement from home – is best reflected in this poem. Rossen (1989) observes that the poem demonstrates 'the role of Larkin's ambivalence toward England in terms of being the Englishman abroad' (p. 64). Here the narrator is an Englishman who feels that he is not at home in Ireland. His

sense of belonging to home is deepened by means of his foreignness. Though he got used to Ireland's 'draughty streets', 'Archaic smell of dockland', 'The herring-hawker's cry' and finds himself 'not unworkable' there (Larkin, 1988, p.104). For the Larkin speaker here 'Strangeness made sense' and 'The salt rebuff of speech,/ Insisting so on difference' paradoxically 'made' him 'welcome'

(Larkin, 1988, p. 104). But he cannot derive any homely pleasure from this strange land. The strangeness of this foreign land proves him 'separate'. Likewise Andrew Swarbrick (1995) points out that the poem 'carries a note of nostalgia, but more urgent is its concern with strangeness and separateness' (p. 94). The narrator's estrangement from home makes him feel an innate sense of belonging to England. His plausible longing for home is sharpened. But transferred back to England, his being at home in England leads him feel that he is not. The relative comfort of 'customs and establishments' at home in England still urges him to wish for 'elsewhere'. So the narrator finds nowhere is alternative for his living as the last line finally dissolves his sense of home in England. His sense of non-belonging towards home in England is more agonising because 'Here no elsewhere underwrites my existence' (Larkin, 1988, p. 104). He always longs for an 'elsewhere' where he feels at home. The title also aptly refers to 'the importance of elsewhere' where he can 'own' his home. He is still in search of his home. But for the Englishman 'elsewhere' is always unreachable, never becoming 'here'. It is always somewhere other than where he is now. By Larkin's own admission, 'One longs for infinity and absence, the beauty of somewhere you're not' (Thwaite, 2002, p. 59). So neither in Ireland nor in England he seems to belong to. While reviewing the poem Richard Hoffpauir (1991) writes, 'Our existence should not need to be underwritten (secured or guaranteed) by that which is alien to what we are' (p. 274). The concluding line is highly significant as it challenges the narrator's earthly existence, the very state of being alive. It emphasises his sense of ultimate estrangement: his non-existence. This idea is hinted in the very first line which speaks of the protagonist's aloneness and homelessness in Ireland: 'Lonely in Ireland, since it was not home' (Larkin, 1988, p. 104). To borrow Edna Longley's words, 'In 'The Importance of Elsewhere' what is *not* home betrays inner estrangement from what should be' (Booth, 2000, p. 44).

Conclusion

The feeling of non-belonging and estrangement Larkin portrayed in his poetry is representative of human life in post-war Britain in the 1940s and 1950s. With the loss of English power over the colony in Asia and Africa, degradation of family and religious values

individual human existence became overshadowed. Larkin is known for depicting common human experience as he actually saw around him in England. Larkin once said, 'I hate being abroad. Generally speaking, the further one gets from home the greater the misery' (Larkin, 1983, p. 55). His sense of belonging to home is sharpened when he is absent from home. Having no 'wife, children, house, land' Larkin considers himself 'an outsider' (Thwaite, 1992, p. 460). Unable to find 'own' home for living entails inevitable existential crisis in the lives of Larkin's characters. 'Living on the margins was not only a geographical fact for Larkin, but an imaginative site as well, where 'here' met 'elsewhere' and beyond the margin lay endlessness' (Swarbrick, 1995, p. 169). Living almost exclusively in provincial cities for his entire life Larkin develops a crisis of belonging to home. To borrow words from John Osborne (2008), 'A sense of incomplete belonging was to Larkin what captivity was to the Jews, exile to the Irish and enforced diaspora to Western blacks: deracination

underwrites them all' (p. 230). His feeling of 'far' from home provokes poems of estrangement and non-belonging.

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