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**RHYME, METER, AND CLOSURE IN PHILIP
LARKIN'S "AN ARUNDEL TOMB"**

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In his 1965 preface to *The North Ship*, Philip Larkin names three major poets who influenced his "undergraduate" and "post-Oxford" work: W. H. Auden, Dylan Thomas, and W. B. Yeats. He goes on to describe Yeats as the most potent, and potentially destructive, of these influences: "I spent the next three years trying to write like Yeats, not because I liked his personality or understood his ideas but out of infatuation with his music (to use the word I think Vernon [Watkins] used). In fairness to myself it must be admitted that it is a particularly potent music, pervasive as garlic, and has ruined many a better talent."¹ At a time when many young poets were resisting this "dangerous" music, fearful of losing poetic sense in mere sound, one challenge was to find new approaches to the use of rhyme and meter. Clearly Auden, as Larkin describes it, one of the earliest influences on him, had suggested one alternative: rhyme used as a precision tool to achieve ironic effects, rhyme and meter working in conjunction to create crispness and clarity of sound, rather than, according to the fears of the time, furthering sloppy emotion. Yet, as Larkin hints, unwary imitation of such a dominant figure as Auden could also be dangerous to a beginning poet.

Through his experiments in imitation, some of which are recorded in *The North Ship*, Larkin developed a handling of the technical problems of rhyme and meter that was essentially his own. In the mature work, for instance the poems in *The Whitsun Weddings*, the persona's often conversational and meditative tone gains assurance from the restraining counterpoint of rhyme and meter.

If this does not at first sound particularly unusual, a sense of Larkin's distinctiveness may emerge through a brief comparison with the work of Auden and the American contemporary, Robert Lowell, poets who also struggle with the restraints of traditional forms. If Auden's use of surprising rhymes is often, in its sheer modernity and sharp ironies, strikingly dramatic, Larkin's preference is for its undramatic use. In such a poem as "Faith Healing," the handling is so subtle that we can almost read the whole poem through without being aware of its rhymes. Lowell, in such early poems as "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket," frequently does battle with the formal order of rhyme and meter, through his violent juxtapositions, breaking out of its expected boundaries of possibility. In contrast, Larkin, in "An

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Arundel Tomb," almost insidiously diminishes the importance of rhyme and measure, using both with great skill to undermine them. With an impression of quiet ease and in language that is highly "readable," he subverts conventional or traditional expectations about how rhyme will function. Perhaps it may be said that Larkin learned from his early interpretations and imitations of Yeats what not to do with rhyme and meter.

Since much of my paper will deal with the emotional effects, in a particular historical context, of one poet's manipulation of formal properties, it is necessarily somewhat speculative. I do not wish to suggest that all the word-to-word formal choices in these poems were deliberately made with a conscious sense of all their possible emotional effects. Rather, the formal choices resulted from a consistent attitude about how language might be used in the rendering of a particular increasingly more insistent view of the world.

A brief look at Poem XVII and "The Dancer" from *The North Ship* can show us part of what Larkin learned from his early experiments with "Yeatsian" verse. The mournful lyric, Poem XVII, is not, of course, representative of Yeats' actual work. Larkin himself stresses that he never knew Yeats' last poems during the period of imitation. Rather, Poem XVII is a young poet's interpretation of the Yeatsian musical tradition. Certain skills have been mastered. Rhyme and meter here work appropriately to achieve calculated and consistent effects. For instance, take the romantic opening of the poem:

To write one song, I said,
As sad as the sad wind
That walks around my bed,
Having one simple fall
As a candle-flame swells, and is thinned,
As a curtain stirs by the wall
— For this I must visit the dead.²

Note that the first four lines are each made up of three iambic feet, creating a regularity of sound that builds or accumulates to a pitch of intensity. This intensity, or heightened emotion, is achieved, I believe, in the fifth and sixth lines, which have the effect of "breaking out" of the rhythm into energetic irregularity. The metrical effects, then, seem pretty clearly to echo the emotional direction, with a longer line, and some departure from the "regular" cadence signalling heightened feeling.

In the poem's second and final stanza, the visited "dead" undergo a species of transformation into a living force. The cemetery "stones" now "shine like gold" as morning approaches:

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That stones would shine like gold
 Above each sodden grave,
 This, I had not foretold,
 Nor the birds' clamour, nor
 The image morning gave
 Of more and ever more,
 As some vast seven-piled wave,
 Mane-flinging, manifold,
 Streams at an endless shore.

Looking at the whole stanza, we can see a phenomenon that is perhaps not surprising in a poem with such short lines: many of the important or key words in the poem occur at the end of the line, and so gain an added emphasis from being rhyme-words. Such rhyme-words as "gold," "grave," "foretold," "wave," and "shore" are easily the most important in their respective lines, as far as content goes, and nearly all are nouns which carry a high degree of force in the poem as a whole. (The one exception to this pattern is the placement of the conjunction "nor" in the end of line position. Although its use here is consciously "poetic" in a way that the later poems repudiate, its placement foreshadows a technique that becomes more frequent in the later work).

As we move to the ending, we can see that the image of morning as a gathering wave is leading up to what might be regarded as a poetic "big finish." Keeping to the framework of the poem's iambic trimeter, the last two lines nevertheless heavily accent the first syllable in each line. This emphasis on both the first and last syllables, echoed in two such short lines, creates a dramatic tug-of-war, a straining, I believe, between the "shore" and the "wave," which "Mane-flinging, manifold./ Streams at an endless shore." The rhyme-words again are probably the most emotionally charged in the line. Clearly, then, both rhyme and meter are being manipulated here to create what is designed to be a powerful ending for the poem.

In general, we can make roughly accurate statements about the poem's use of formal properties. A succession of metrical lines builds to a heightened emotional pitch. A departure from, or variation of, the meter is associated with energy. Rhyme-words often occupy a privileged position of emotional power. The final line strives for dramatic effects.

"The Dancer," another poem from this period, also shows an ending wreathed round with dramatic effects. This poem is probably both an imitation of and a conscious departure from Yeats's "Rose" poems, with echoes of the famous conclusion of "Among School Children." The argument of the poem suggests, I think, a more pessimistic variation on a traditional Yeatsian theme. The "dancing" which creates the world may be illusory, for "the world weaved" by the

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"dancer's feet" is flawed, "incomplete." "Wholeness" and pattern are probably illusions, but we must nevertheless believe in them. If the dancer were to "admit" the flaws of her work

Then would the moon go raving,
The moon, the anchorless
Moon go swerving
Down at the earth for a catastrophic kiss.

(*The North Ship*, "The Dancer," p. 27)

Here we see again effects noticed before—the energy of the longer irregular line, and the power of the rhyme-word as the line's climax—combined to create a dramatic conclusion for the poem.

In the mature poems of *The Whitsun Weddings*, Larkin uses what he learned of the effects of rhyme and meter in the service of a different aesthetic, furthering a view of the world that is more truly his own. Poem XVII and "The Dancer" revealed, first, a gilding of the "dead" world, with gravestones transformed into "gold," and second, a concession of the need for the "illusion" of the dancer's "weaving." In contrast, the poems in *The Whitsun Weddings* stubbornly refuse to sacrifice a grim, often harsh, honesty for the fanciful pleasures of illusion. Renouncing the "dangerous" music of "Yeatsian" poetry, their rhythms are closer to those of speech than to those of song.

Larkin, of course, continues to use rhyme and meter to enrich the meaning of individual lines. He continues to explore the emotional possibilities of rhyme and meter. Yet his aesthetic choices are now frequently the opposite of those in the early poems. In "An Arundel Tomb," "Dockery and Son," and "Mr. Bleaney," we can see the consequences of some of these new choices.

In "An Arundel Tomb," a meditation, almost conversational in tone, on a medieval tomb effigy, we can identify three new poetic techniques at work: 1) the introduction, more and more frequently, of weak words, i.e., prepositions and conjunctions, into the end of line position, 2) in keeping with this, a deliberate undermining of final phrases and final lines, both in individual stanzas and the poem as a whole, and 3) the use of metrical variation to diminish rather than to heighten emotional power.

Thus, scanning the poem, we find such rhyme-words as "until," "still," "and," "in," "away," "of" and "into." The effect of ending a line with such words is, of course, to speed our eyes to the beginning of the following line, so that we hardly notice the rhyme at all, missing its potential "music." Yet such choices also result in other and more subtle effects. The second stanza, describing the stone figures of the "earl" and

the "countess," as they lie together on their tomb, joined in death, exemplifies the use of these weak rhyme-words:

Such plainness of the pre-baroque
Hardly involves the eye, until
It meets his left-hand gauntlet, still
Clasped empty in the other; and
One sees, with a sharp tender shock,
His hand withdrawn, holding her hand.³

Here, three of the six rhyme-words are weak line-endings that undermine the emotional and musical effect of rhyme; thus, they weaken not only their own force as rhymes, but the potential of the rhymed pair of which they are a part.

It might be argued that these weak rhyme-words, coming as they do in succession in lines two, three, and four of the stanza, help to "hollow out" the stanza, making us sense the austere "plainness of the pre-baroque" sculptural style, which "hardly involves the eye." "Until" and "still," especially, function as words that preserve and prolong this moment of disengaged waiting, before we encounter the "sharp tender shock" of the one really important sculptural detail: "his hand . . . holding her hand." It is notable that the emotional effect of "baroque"/"shock"—potentially a strong rhymed pair because of their dominance in their respective lines—is undermined by their being slant rhymes that we hardly hear at all.

In connection with the third point mentioned above—the use of metrical variation to diminish rather than to increase emotional power—note the unusual quality of line four:

Clasped empty in the other; and

With the exception of the first accented syllable, the line is a fairly regular example of iambic tetrameter. For instance, "in" is stronger than the second syllable of "empty," "and" is stronger than the second syllable of "other," and so on. Yet actually, all the syllables are so weak that the total effect is that of lack of accent. No doubt, this also suits the position of the line as the blank moment just before the "tender shock" that follows.

Perhaps it is necessary to repeat here that the formal decisions just described need not be regarded as the explication of a fully conscious process on the part of the poet. Rather, my analysis seeks to document the somewhat intangible results of a new set of aesthetic commitments, in contrast to those embodied in the two poems from *The North Ship*. Larkin's earlier "Yeatsian" world view would probably not have

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permitted the production of a line such as that just discussed in the second stanza, in which meter "undermines" itself.

As noted before, the second stanza closes on the relatively dramatic note of the clasped stone "hands." Yet this dramatic quality is hastily diminished in the following stanza, when the persona asserts that this arresting sculptural detail was just a "commissioned grace," a conventional touch that "friends would see."

More often, in contrast to the close of the second stanza, lines and stanzas end on an emotional "downbeat"—clearly a point of difference from such a work as Poem XVII in *The North Ship*. Thus, the first stanza closes with "that faint hint of the absurd—/ The little dogs under their feet." Similarly, the third stanza executes a clever turn at the end, by undermining the sculpture as a work of art in its role of preserving a past moment. We are reminded by the persona that the intimate detail of the clasped hands has been merely "Thrown off in helping to prolong/ The Latin names around the base." To preserve or "prolong" a name is, of course, to preserve the memory of a particular person. But "Latin names around the base" become mere words, forgotten, perhaps unreadable inscriptions, and the line ends on an almost trivial note.

The following stanzas continue both to exemplify and to undermine a formal structure, with their use of slant-rhymes, unconventional line-breaks, and end-words such as "in," "of," and "into." The poem's final line is an affirmation that could be, in another context, tremendously strong. But by the time it appears, it has been hedged round by doubts, so that it has, not the effect of a clarion call, but of a whisper. In fact, the final stanza is a masterful staggered movement of affirmation and disclaimer, with positive words like "transfigured," "fidelity," and "final blazon" effectually negated, paired with such expressions as "untruth," "hardly meant," and "almost-instinct almost true":

Time has transfigured them into
Untruth. The stone fidelity
They hardly meant has come to be
Their final blazon, and to prove
Our almost-instinct almost true:
What will survive of us is love.

This apparently simple, yet incredibly rich, poem suggests the limitations, not only of art, but of the values of fidelity, preservation, and love, according to which we try to live. Mirroring so perfectly in its own simplicity of language that "plainness of the pre-baroque" which it depicts, it would seem to be not only a poetic embodiment of stylistic austerity, but a manifesto in favor of it, if Larkin's world

permitted manifestoes of any sort. Compared to Poem XVII, this second visit to the "dead," nearly twenty years later, is hedged round with ironies and doubts. The impulse towards affirmation is still present, but now an almost reluctant honesty forbids any false or tricky strategies in order to achieve it.

A more extensive study of Larkin's use of meter would include an examination of such even more "conversational" poems as "Dockery and Son," and "Mr. Bleaney," where Larkin, like many of the poets of his generation, strives to fit the cadences of iambic meter to the rhythms of speech. In "Dockery and Son," a regular iambic pentameter embodies a quiet succession of random thoughts. The following central line, in perfect pentameter, but subtly manipulating its pauses to work against the meter, is a striking example:

. . . well, it just shows
How much . . . How little . . . Yawning, I suppose
I fell asleep . . .

(*The Whitsun Weddings*, "Dockery and Son," p. 37)

In "Mr. Bleaney," which raises the question that "how we live measures our own nature," a rich use of poetic measure yields numerous effects. Metrical regularity underlines the unchanging regularity of Mr. Bleaney's habits, in such lines as "He kept on plugging at the four aways—" or "Christmas at his sister's house in Stoke." Yet metrical variation and unexpected pauses within the line can also be manipulated to diminish certainty or emotional assertions, creating the shiver of doubt present in the last line of the final stanza, ending on a dying fall:

But if he stood and watched the frigid wind . . .
Telling himself that this was home . . .
And shivered, without shaking off the dread

That how we live measures our own nature,
And at his age having no more to show
Than one hired box should make him pretty sure
He warranted no better, I don't know.

(*The Whitsun Weddings*, "Mr. Bleaney," p. 10)

In the world of Larkin's poems, leisure is often less than exciting; work, a necessary tedium; marriage, frequently a record of disappointments; and producing children, sometimes a form of diminishment. In this world, where the conventions still operate, but without much success, weakened rhyme, meter undermining itself, and

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endings that lack traditional closure become highly appropriate poetic devices, agents of a quiet subversion of certainties.

NOTES

¹Phillip Larkin, Preface to *The North Ship* (London, 1966), p. 9.

²*The North Ship*, p. 29. Page numbers for poems from this book will be cited parenthetically in the text.

³Phillip Larkin, *The Whitsun Weddings* (New York, 1960), p. 45. Page numbers for poems in this edition will be cited parenthetically in the text.