

The Movement was more a ‘found’ body of poets than a genuine literary group. In this article Andrew Green explores some of the characteristics that hold the group together and the ways in which they sought to use language to relate poetry to life.

What was The Movement?

‘The Movement’ was a term first used in 1954 by the literary editor of the *Spectator*, J.D. Scott. He used it to define the work of a group of English writers, the best known being Kingsley Amis, Philip Larkin, D.J. Enright, John Wain, Elizabeth Jennings and Robert Conquest. The reputation of The Movement relies on three major anthologies of the 1950s and 1960s. The first – *Poets of the 1950s* – edited by D.J. Enright and first published in Japan, was largely anti-romantic, witty and often sardonic by nature. Two further collections, both entitled *New Lines*, followed and included newer poets such as Anthony Thwaite, Ted Hughes, Vernon Scannell and George MacBeth. By the time of the second *New Lines*, however, The Movement’s heyday as a fashionable artistic force had passed.

The name ‘The Movement’ implies motion; so, we might reasonably ask from what and to what the poets of The Movement were moving. Here definition becomes difficult, however, as in reality The Movement was a fairly loose gathering of writers. The major literary movements of the early twentieth century, such as futurism, vorticism and dada had been formed around strongly articulated and often stridently political literary manifestos which set out clear principles for their adherents. The Movement (a group defined from the outside, remember, by a literary critic) never really established such a set of strongly held views about what art should be. In what might be considered a particularly English *weltanschauung*, the writers of The Movement coalesced not around a set of positive principles for a new poetry but rather around a loose body of negative perceptions of what poetry had become.

In essence, the connective tissue of The Movement comes down to its poets’ shared belief that good poetry dealt with simple, sensuous content and employed traditional, conventional and dignified form. As much is apparent from Conquest’s foreword to *New Lines*. He does not set out in new and positive terms what the poets are trying

to achieve, but rather defines the connections between the poets as 'little more than a negative determination to avoid bad principles'. The cornerstone of The Movement, in other words, is essentially reactive (if not actually reactionary) rather than revolutionary. Conquest's polemical introduction eschews what he perceives as the obscure and over-metaphorical nature of much of the poetry of the 1930s and the 1940s; instead, he calls for 'rational structure and comprehensible language'.

Such a view of poetry emerges, perhaps, from the writers' sense of Britain's reduced political status in the post-World War 2 world. As an antidote to England's politically reduced circumstances, they insist upon the importance and endurance (and superiority?) of the English poetic tradition over experimental modernist poetry. The poets of The Movement, therefore, frequently provide a tone of nostalgic yearning for what they perceive as a decaying (and mythical?) Olde Englande.

Changing (?) England

As the preceding discussion suggests, the works of The Movement poets can be read in one sense as a project directed at rescuing a disappearing vision of England, Englishness and English poetry. Community – or rather an innately conservative version of community – as such becomes a nostalgic repository. As a corollary of this, changes in values and in communities are regarded with suspicion. In 'The Young Ones', for instance, Jennings's persona casts a wary (and surely half-envious) eye '[a]bove the unread pages of a book' to look at the teenage girls on her bus with their 'hair piled up high. / New styles each month'. The contrast with her own gawky teenage years, 'huddled in school coats, my satchel hung / Lop-sided on my shoulder' is striking. Whilst in one sense the disapproving gaze of the woman implies superiority, her later acknowledgement that these girls have reached 'a state we cannot reach' / No talk of "awkward ages" now', reveals a note of envy and personal regret similar to Larkin's sense that he has missed out on sex in his famous poem 'Annus Mirabilis':

Sexual intercourse began

In nineteen sixty-three

(Which was rather late for me) –
Between the end of the *Chatterley* ban
And the Beatles' first LP.

The uncomfortable (Movement) balancing of the old and the new is captured in Jennings's final line, which evokes the "old-time" dance' between the 'unsure' and the 'bold'.

Differently, in poems such as 'Going Going' and 'Church Going' (each employing the telling word 'going' with its overtones of passing and loss) Larkin displays his sense of anger that something of value is being lost as he envisages the disappearance of his beloved Olde Englande. In 'Going Going' he sees it being systematically gobbled up by motorways or shopping malls or auctioned off and reflects upon the changing nature of the landscape and the society that inhabits and shapes it. In 'Church Going', for all its religious scepticism, there is a powerful sense of something holy, something innately valuable in the traditions symbolised by 'this cross of ground'.

The pervasive cultural conflict between the old and the new emerges strongly in a poem such as 'Nothing To Be Said' in which Larkin contrasts the rural ('nomads among stones, / Small-statured cross-faced tribes') with the urban ('cobble-close families / In mill towns'). The contrasts between the urban and the rural, the young and the old, the new and the 'olde' however, rather than solely illustrating difference, serve ultimately as a vehicle for exploring the common lot of humanity. In spite of the ostensible differences between these would-be opposites, Larkin (and the other Movement poets) are forced back upon the fundamentals of shared, wryly humorous experience. Jenny Joseph's enduring 'Warning' is a good example here as we see the 'wannabe' rebel projecting herself as an unruly old woman. Her imaginary outrages, however, are quickly swallowed up in the practicalities of 'keep[ing] us dry', 'pay[ing] our rent' and 'set[ting] a good example for the children'.

The language of The Movement

One of the key features of the language of The Movement poets is its diversity and plain-spokenness. Given the group's desire to return to what Conquest called

‘comprehensible language’, this is perhaps unsurprising. Larkin’s poetry is notable for language that ranges from the highly poetic to the earthy and coarse, including a notorious spattering of four-letter words. So, at one moment in ‘The Whitsun Weddings’ he revels in intense poetic diction:

there swelled
A sense of falling, like an arrow-shower
Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain.

In another mood, however, Larkin is capable of quite other things. In ‘Take One Home for the Kiddies’ he captures the pragmatic and dismissive tones of the children who have just experienced the death of a pet. He captures perfectly the harshly comic juxtaposition of life and death. The children see the animal’s demise not as a cause for sadness, but rather an opportunity for a new game: ‘Fetch the shoebox, fetch the shovel - / Mam, we’re playing funerals now.’ Larkin’s no-nonsense language is seen at its bluntest in ‘This Be the Verse’ in which he ruminates infamously on the relationship between parents and children: ‘They fuck you up, your mum and dad. / They may not mean to, but they do.’ Perhaps what is most striking here is not the shockingness but the fundamental honesty and inclusivity of the poetic voice. There is no dimension of language that Larkin sees as without the remit of poetry, a view he shares with other Movement poets.

A similar diversity of language is evident in the work of other Movement poets. Jennings’s ‘Song at the Beginning of Autumn’ employs a poetic intensity similar Larkin’s ‘The Whitsun Weddings’. Her verbal inversions and laboured alliterations are almost awkward:

All looks like Summer still;
Colours are quite unchanged, the air

On green and white serenely thrives.

Heavy the trees with growth and full

The fields. Flowers flourish everywhere.

Differently, in 'A Song about Major Eatherly', Wain presents the gory and distinctly un-/anti-Romantic image of a trapped fox that 'will gnaw / through his own leg'. Like Larkin's and Jennings's, however, Wain's language is appropriate to the broader philosophical implications of the situation he presents, and the harsh facts of nature pave the way for a poetic discourse on the realities of existence:

It is so important to live

that he forgives himself the agony,

consenting, for life's sake, to the desperate teeth

going through the bone and pulp, the gasping yelps.

In 'Your Attention Please', Peter Porter deploys the language of journalism in the service of poetry:

The Polar Dew has just warned that

A nuclear rocket strike of

At least one thousand megatons

Has been launched by the enemy

Directly at our major cities.

This is direct, almost anti-poetic in nature. His starkly functional language is appropriate to his poetic intent in exploring the threat of nuclear holocaust.

As these examples show, for the poets of The Movement language in all its manifestations was suitable for poetry. What was of paramount importance was that their work should be recognisable and approachable (features they felt to be lacking in the more experimental oeuvre of the modernists). Whether through poetic diction, coarse language, slang or journalese, language needed to provide a lens through which readers could clearly access lived experience, spirituality, harsh nature or world events.

Conclusion

Taken together, the works of The Movement poets represent a plural yet strangely conservative reaction to the changing England in which they lived and to the deconstructive existential and linguistic experiments of the modernists. The variety of their language is, however, of considerable wealth. By turns conversational, intense, childish, obscene, bantering, serious, banal, highly poetic, earthbound and stretching for spiritual experience, it creates an aesthetic synthesis of the 'high' and the 'low'. On occasions, as in Jennings's poem 'Answers' or Larkin's 'Water', their poetry is even metaphysical. At the same time, their linguistic range can create an uneasy sense of dislocation that requires readers to redefine what constitutes 'poetic' diction – a redefinition, ironically enough, that was probably only possible in the light of the seismic language changes forged by the modernists that The Movement poets set out to define themselves against.