Being contemporaries, Philip Larkin (1922–1985) and Molly Keane (1904–1995) could not have avoided the influences of the same general historical and cultural climate under which they developed their own literary styles and personal messages, chosen to express a variety of ideas, which sometimes overlap, and are sometimes different. ¹

Having as a background a history of Western thought, particularly the modern aesthetic streams of the second half of the twentieth century – ranging from modernism to the deconstruction of post-structuralism – Larkin and Keane share a common ground of feelings of negativism, nihilism, alienation and atheism. Expressing themselves in the different mediums or literary genres of poetry and the novel, respectively, Larkin and Keane use the relation between the past and the present as a symbol that connects the text and the complex possibilities of its interpretation. Their work reveals that they both navigate a search for the soul through the aspects of their chosen genre. In Larkin’s case, it is the force of the poetry and, in his case, its absence of conventional metaphors and its use of colloquialisms. In Keane’s case, it is the novel, and the use of irony and abjection.

However, the significance of the unspoken language contained in the work of both authors points towards their encounter with semiology, an almost Derridian principle of deconstruction of the text, with its embedded signs and symbols. Each of these signs or symbols contains a certain meaning, and within it, its own opposition. The symbols, although seemingly absent, actually create present time, and the interplay of the absence and the presence creates new meaning. Each present moment exists in its private relation to a past as its own opposite and continuation, also forming the uninterrupted flow towards the future, as seen in Larkin’s poem “Disintegration”:

Time running beneath the pillow wakes
Lovers entrained who in the name of love
Were promised the steeples and fanlights of a dream;

Joins the renters of each single room
Across the tables to observe a life
Dissolving in the acid of their sex;

Time that scatters hair upon a head
Spreads the ice sheet on the shaven lawn;
Singing an annual permit for the frost
Ploughs the stubble in the land at last
To introduce the unknown to the known
And only by politeness make them breed;

Time over the roofs of what has nearly been
Circling, a migratory, static bird,
Predicts no change in future’s lancing shape,
And daylight shows the streets still tangled up;
Time points the simian camera in the head
Upon confusion to be seen and seen. (C. P., 1942)

Here, time, as an ultimate symbol of the finite, overcomes the personal sorrows of fallen love and other human failures and alters “over the roofs of what has nearly been” with immeasurable infinity. The definition of time as a “simian camera in the head” takes the reader back to an encounter with unconscious mind, disappearing into the ambiguity of primordial images of a collective past where the images of inborn intuitions are stored.

The multiple levels of meaning in poetic language also match some aspects expressed in Ferdinand de Saussure’s Course in General Linguistics (1960). Saussure’s language analysis shows the example of the complexity of linguistic signs contained in language, which are profoundly psychological and work on a principle of associations and mental comparisons of opposites.

In Keane’s opus, a similar simulation of the present or reality follows through the flow of the stream of Aroon’s consciousness. The symbols of abjection are usually altered, and then transformed from organic meaning into the unconscious and then again back into reality. This is shown in a moment of demystification when Aroon, paging through a glossy magazine, finds the picture announcing the engagement of her beloved Richard to somebody else, and all her dreams are drowned in a second:

Not tears, but pain, seized on me, my insides griping and loosening. The absolute need of getting to the lavatory possessed me. Even my terrible distress had to find this absurd necessity. As I walked carefully down the long, warm room, I had the idea that the light had changed like a short winter afternoon, and the room and my life were both spread with sand and salt. (G.B., 208)