CHAPTER XI

THE NORTH SHIP
The North Ship, Philip Larkin's first collection of poems, was published in 1949. In the previous year some of his poems had been published in a volume entitled Poetry from Oxford at Wartime. The proprietor of a small but then well-known publishing house invited some of the contributors to submit collections of their individual works. At first Larkin felt highly flattered and excited at the prospect of the publication of his first individual collection. He describes his feelings as 'an ambition tangibly satisfied.' But he follows it up in a characteristically Larkinesque fashion with a reflective qualifying question:

Yet was it? Then as now, I could never contemplate it without a twinge, faint or powerful, of shame compounded with disappointment. Some of this was caused by the contents but not all: I felt in some ways cheated.

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2 Ibid.
Larkin has expressed quite clearly here his dissatisfaction with his own work and his acute awareness of its shortcomings. His sense of being cheated may arise from two or three different sources. He may have felt perhaps that this volume did not ring with his own authentic voice, that it carried too many derivative overtones. Again, he could have felt that his truths had not been expressed with adequate power and force. Added to that may have been his instinctive awareness of the ambivalence at the heart of all things that joy and excitement carry an admixture of disappointment and pain. Even in that youthful fervour, there is a deep dissatisfaction. The poet was yet to explore his own potential and find the right medium. His individual path to poetry was through prose and so Larkin published two novels successively in the following two years. Jill was published in 1946 from Shropshire and A Girl in Winter in 1947 from Leicester. There was considerable span of time lapse before his next collection of poems XX poems appeared in 1951. The second collection at once established him as a poet of exceptional talent and originality. He consented to the re-publication of The North Ship with some reluctance and wryly expresses his embarrassment in the Introduction to the second edition:
Looking back, I find in the poems not one abandoned self but several - the ex-schoolboy, for whom Auden was the only alternative to 'old fashioned' poetry; the undergraduate, whose work a friend affably characterised as "Dylan Thomas, but you've a sentimentality that's all your own"; and the immediately post-Oxford self, isolated in Shropshire with a complete Yeats stolen from the local girls' school.3

Larkin rightly acknowledges that the poems in The North Ship are encumbered with many influences. W.B. Yeats has been the first predominant influence on the young Larkin, which Larkin acknowledges in his Introduction to the 2nd edition of The North Ship. In 1943, Vernon Watkins visited the English Club at Oxford and lectured on Yeats' poetry. Larkin was greatly impressed by his exalted, impassioned speech and spent the next few weeks in collecting Yeats' verse and fell under the spell of his melodious music. Larkin writes:

I spent the next three years trying to write like Yeats, not because I liked

3 Ibid.
his personality or understood his ideas but out of infatuation with his music ... 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.  

Some of the poems in The North Ship show a pervasive Yeatsian influence in rhythm, imagery, theme, choice of words and stanza-form.

Poem I (TNS 11-12), in the forced Yeatsian manner, attempts to celebrate seasonal cycles of renewal, while its refrain is a reminder of the ceaseless passage of Time - one of Larkin's favourite themes.

All catches alight
At the spread of spring:
Birds erased with flight
Branches that fling
Leaves up to the light —
Every one thing,
Shape, colour and voice,
Cries out, Rejoice!

A drum taps, a wintry drum.

4 Ibid., p.9.
The post is exhorting all creation to rejoice and be glad and to live fully the present moment. But even "at the spread of spring", "a drum taps: a wintry drum." If spring suggests the beginning of new life, winter is a symbol of Death. When life is enjoyed at its fullest, especially by the youthful lovers, who would think about the imminent end?

What lovers worry much
That a ghost bid them touch?
A drum taps: a wintry drum.

But when the wheel of time turns full circle, as it always does, the memories of the 'buried ones' are brought back to mind with the beat of the wintry drum.

Let the wheel spin out,
Till all created things
With shout and answering shout.
Cast off rememberings;
Let it all come about
Till centuries of springs
And all their buried men
Stand on the earth again.
A drum taps: a wintry drum.
The phrases like "all created things" and 'centuries of springs' definitely echo the early Yeatsian exhaltation. However, the influence of Yeats is much more than a mere tone of voice. David Timms observes:

"Larkin borrows Yeats's view of time, of evolution and the second coming, his wheel another version of the Yeatsian gyre. These poems are marvellous imitations."  

The exalted emotional mood and forced working up of feelings, which are definitely Yeatsian, can be discerned in the early Larkin. As T.S. Eliot has written: "... the poetry of a single poet, invades the youthful consciousness and assumes complete possession for a time." In Larkin's case, the model of his early youth is undoubtedly Yeats.

In the poem 'Winter' (TWS 19-20) the imagery of water, winter, light and swans definitely reminds us of Yeats's 'The Wild Swans at Coole'. Both the poets

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depict a scene of solitude that conditions their vision.

In Poem XXVIII (EHS 41) Larkin makes use of Yeatsian hexameter in the latter two lines of every stanza:

Is it for now or for always,
The world hangs on a stalk?
Is it a trick or a trysting-place,
The woods we have found to walk?

clearly echoes the following lines from Yeats's 'The Indian Upon God':

I passed a little further on and heard a lotus talk
Who made the world and ruleth it, He hangeth on a stalk
For I am in His image made, and all His tinkling tide
Is but a sliding drop of rain between His petals wide

The use of the words 'world', 'hangs', 'stalk', have the same effect of movement and rhythm as in the

poem of the youthful poet. The lilting rhythm and the catchy tune express the sentiments of gaiety. But the joy expressed remains something external even as the verse form!

Is it a mirage, or miracle,  
Your lips that lift at mine;  
And the suns like a juggler's juggling-balls,  
Are they a sham or a sign?  
Shine out, my sudden angel,  
Break fear with breast and brow,  
I take you now and for always,  
For always is always now.

The second stanza in Larkin's poem seem to cancel out the doubts of the first stanza and the poet compares this experience of love with a 'miracle' and 'sign', both, highly suggestive of a super reality and 'sign' is a pre-figuration of a vision. Thus, the poem progresses towards a highly romantic mood, akin to that of Keats or Shelley, and the final stanza, fearlessly and openly accepts the joy and happiness of eternal now. Larkin, like early Yeats shows an exuberant romanticism.
But the most Yeatsian is Poem II (MS 32-33). It bears a marked resemblance to 'Sailing to Byzantium' and 'Among School Children'. The similarity of construction is unmistakable. Both are written in the 8-line stanza form. The theme of these two poems, both subject-wise and melody-wise, is somewhat similar. They both deal with 'old age' and 'the creation of art'.

There is also a marked resemblance in the imagery used. Larkin describes an old man as 'a sack of meal upon two sticks' and Yeats wrote:

An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick. 8

An easy conversational tone and rhythm is established through hyphenation and exclamations:

Damn all explanatory rhymes!
To be that girl! - but that's impossible;

and Yeats in 'Among School Children' writes:

Had pretty plumage once - enough of that,
Better to smile on all that smile, and show
There is a comfortable kind of old scarecrow. 9

8 Ibid., p.191.
9 Ibid., p.212.
Such imitations during a poet's embryonic stage has its own justification. As Eliot has put it wittily, "Immature poets imitate, mature poets steal." Poem XX shares Yeats's poetic style and sensibility of the middle period. Both the poets either create or imagine the characters that stand in contrast to their own attitude.

This self-dramatisation remained with Larkin till the end, lending a great strength to his poetry. In this poem, Larkin looks at the young girl's wild, abandonment and joy first with wistful jealousy. But, after that momentary temptation, a more mature and well-considered response came from within and the poet found a deeper and stronger affinity with 'the two old ragged men / Clearing the drifts with shovel and a spade'. He realises that he too must endure the hard work, forging his 'explanatory rhymes' for only through 'shovel and spade work' he could:

Build(s) up the crags from which the spirit leaps
--- The beast most innocent
That is so fabulous it never sleeps;
If I can keep against all argument
Such image of a snow-white unicorn,
Then as I pray it may for sanctuary
Descend at last to me,
And put into my hand its golden horn.

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In 'sailing to Byzantium' Yeats also prays to 'the sages in God's holy fire' to 'consume his heart away' and gather him 'into the artifice of eternity':

Once out of nature I shall never take
My bodily form from any natural thing,
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;
Or set upon a golden bough to sing
To lords and ladies of Byzantium
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.\[11\]

Yeats too had been provoked to his poem by 'the young in one another's arms' even as Larkin was by 'the girl dragged by the wrists'. Yeats was reminded of his age as Larkin is by the vision of his being seventy; like Yeats, Larkin also rises to a loftiness of imagined idealism and immortality: Yeats's 'golden bird' probably causes Larkin's 'image of a snow-white unicorn'. He too prays that the unicorn may put into his hand 'Its golden horn', the horn of poetry's plenty. It is true that the years

\[11\] W.B. Yeats, op. cit., p.191.
between 1943 and 1950 were formative for the young poet, the influence of 'a particularly poetent music' (TNS 9), of Yeats's poetry was in some measure detrimental to the budding artist. His conscious efforts to replace Hardy for Yeats, have often been exaggerated by the critics. During the late forties, when Larkin mentioned how he was influenced by Hardy's plain-speaking, traditionalist poetry, he voiced the Movement poets's general preference for an undertone of the native English talents and their kinship with the writers who wrote from their daily life and ordinary reality. However, it would be apt to say that Larkin's poetry combines the talents of both the artists. While Hardy's presence is undeniable, his entire poetic output reflects Yeats's sensitivity to beauty and tendency to sudden transcendence. Larkin does echo Yeats's propensity to self-dramatisation and inevitable rhetoric in his later poetry.

Thus the development of Larkin as a poet can be discerned in transition from the early infatuation with Yeats to a deeper affinity for Hardy, as the young poet's personal and historical preference for the empirical truths rather than romantic impulses. But, the critics have overstated this shift from Yeats to Hardy.
Larkin modestly stated in an interview given to Ian Hamilton, "It wasn't any conscious reaction. It's just that when you start writing your own stuff other people's manners won't really do for it."^12 But we also have his own statement, about his willingness to adopt Hardy's 'manner':

"When I came to Hardy it was with a sense of relief that I didn't have to try and jack myself up to a concept of poetry that lay outside my own life - this I felt Yeats was trying to make me do. One could simply relapse back into one's own life and write from it ... Hardy taught one to feel rather than to write."^13

The additional poem XXXII (TWS 48) definitely shows that 'Celtic fever is abated and the patient sleeping soundly' (TWS 10). Larkin writes about an incident taken from everyday life. The restrained tone and subdued manner of the poem are definitely akin to Hardy's style. The poem is an excellent early example of the kind of conflict between two contrary impulses representing both the masters.

^12Ian Hamilton, 'Four Conversations', p.72.

^13Philip Larkin Praises the Poetry of Thomas Hardy', The Listener, 25 July 1968, p.11.
This fusion of polarity is to be the greatest strength of Larkin's later verse. The influence of Hardy can be seen in the choice of concrete imagery and level tone of the poem. The lines 'Turning, I kissed her, / Easily for sheer joy tipping the balance to love' remind of Hardy's 'Even then the scale might have turned / Against love by a feather, / But crimson one cheek of hers burned / When we came in together.' Also, this poetry reflects a greater note of honesty to experience than other poems in The North Ship. The poet seems to be writing from deeply felt experience and is able to root it in a concrete reality. The clear-sighted vision and lack of illusion are also reflective of Hardy's influence on the young poet, when he writes:

Waiting for breakfast, while she brushed her hair
I looked down at the empty hotel yard
Once meant for coaches. Cobblestones were wet,
But sent no light back to the loaded sky,
Sunk as it was with mist down to the roofs,
Drainpipes and fire-escape climbed up
Past rooms still turning their electric light;
I thought: featureless morning, featureless night.

14 Thomas Hardy, 'At the Word "Farewell"]; Chosen Poems of Thomas Hardy 2nd ed. (1916; rpt. London: Macmillan, 1931), p.18.
The poem is written in the form of a monologue. A man has spent the night with a woman in a hotel room and is waiting for breakfast, while she is getting ready.

The influence of both Yeats and Hardy is discernible in this poem. Yeatsian language of aspiration and transcendence cannot be missed. In the second stanza, the speaker expresses this rare feeling of happiness:

Misjudgement: For the stones slept, and the mist wandered absolvingly past all it touched, Yet hung like a stayed breath; the lights burnt on, Pin-points of undisturbed excitement; beyond the glass
The colourless vial of day painlessly spilled
My world back after a year, my lost lost world Like a cropping deer strayed near my path again, Bewaring the mind's least clutch. ...

(TNS 48)

As Andrew Motion has rightly pointed out, the repetition of the word 'lost' rings with the rhetorical style of his early master and the last stanza definitely gives free reign to rhetorical flourish:
But, tender visiting,
Fallow as a deer or an unforced field,
How would you have me? Towards your grace
My promises meet and lock and race like rivers,
But only when you choose.

Though Larkin said that the influence of Hardy helped him to move away from his earlier master, Yeats, critics have aptly observed that 'Larkin's best and most characteristic work reconciles these two worlds and profits by Yeats's example'.

The general mood that pervades the poems of The North Ship is highly romantic. They are subjective in tone and exhibitionistic in their emotionalism. Some of them imitate the poetic current then in vogue – surrealism, for example; or the extravagant manner of the poets of the 'New Apocalypse'. Even the most ardent critics have admitted the derivative and juvenile nature of The North Ship. Lolette Kuby, one of his most appreciative and discerning critics, has this to say:

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"Broadly speaking, the poems in The North Ship carry over from Victorianism that sense of sweet pain and languishing melancholia which the worst of Victorianism had carried over from the worst of Romanticism".16

On the whole, however, we find that Larkin made conscious effort not to be a part of the poetic undergrowth of the time nor be shackled by the chains of the acclaimed masters. He was in search of his own style, his own authentic voice and of a 'master whom he could emulate in feeling' rather than style of expressing the feeling, 'how to feel rather than write'. Thomas Hardy provided such a model for the young Larkin. The dominant emotion of sadness and passive apprehension of suffering in Hardy's poetry appealed to Larkin's own sensibility. Though Hardy's influence on Larkin is visible chiefly in the later volumes, the underlying sadness latent in his temperament finds expression even in his earliest works. Despite a forced note here and there of jubilation, the poems in The North Ship are pervaded by a deep melancholia and a sense of isolation and withdrawal. In many poems, the poet

complains about his inability to communicate and the resulting loneliness, isolation and silence therefrom. Often these complaints seem exaggerated, even unreasonable, the thin and attenuated yearning of a plaintive and romantic young man. But the suffering and pain are real and genuinely felt and can neither be ignored nor doubted. Here the poet is so young, the wound so raw and the pain so fresh that the 'man who suffers' and 'the artist who creates' fail to dissociate themselves and the poems pour out like cries of personal anguish. In Poem XIV 'Nursery Tale' (TMS 26) he writes:

So every journey that I make
Leads me, as in the story he was led,
To some new ambush, to some fresh mistake:
So every journey I begin foretells
A weariness of daybreak, spread
With carrion kisses, carrion farewells.

The poet is tired even before the journey has begun. Disappointment and failure are imminent even before the path is taken. This then is the mood of these poems. The poet suffers from the feeling of anticipated failures and rejections. This hopelessness leads him into withdrawal. In Poem X (TMS 22) he writes:
Within the dream you said:
Let us kiss then,
In this room, in this bed,
But when all's done
We must not meet again.

Hearing this last word,
There was no lambing-night,
No gale-driven bird
Nor frost-encircled root
As cold as my heart.

The poet experiences the pain of final separation but the union itself has taken place within a dream! It is an experience of withdrawal within a withdrawal: dream itself is a step removed from reality, and the parting is a step further into the withdrawal which is the dream. The cause of pain is remote but its effect on the poet is immediate, vivid and distressing. Upon hearing the 'last word' of the beloved the poet's heart turns cold and freezes like 'a frost - encircled root'. The telling image of 'root' suggests something unsprouted and hidden underground and therefore, unseen, unrecognized. The poet's heart turns cold and numb even before it has experienced an awakening. This alludes to an experience of some kind of
spiritual death even before life has begun. The poem is about different degrees of dying.

But even where the images are ostensibly those of daylight and clarion calls, as in the poem that follows, the poet's heart is not stirred by hope. In Poem IV 'Dawn' (TVS 15) the poet suffers such isolation:

To wake, and hear a cook
Out of the distance crying,
To pull the curtains back
And see the clouds flying —
How strange it is
For the heart to be loveless, and as cold as these.

The cook's crowing normally evokes an image of the stirring of life, sound and movement; no less do the movement of flying cloud and pulled curtain connote action and life, but the poet dubs them as 'loveless' and 'cold'; (his heart is 'loveless and cold as these') without any surprise or comment as if it was the most natural thing in the world to compare a loveless and cold heart to the trumpet-tongued call of the cook and the wind-blown clouds! It is as if the poet inhabits a world in which even the most exciting objects leave him benumbed.
The speaker, waking up to life and a new day recognises that this is a malaise; that it is 'strange' for his heart to be so dead and cold; that it must adjust itself once again to bleakness. Everything is far removed 'out of the distance' and only the lonely voice of the bird is heard, and when the curtain is pulled back, the speaker is left to witness the fleeting clouds and the resulting emptiness.

Here, as elsewhere in the volume, the poet uses simple and plain language to express his mood of suffering. Even in these poems of his youth, he does not use exotic imagery and flowery language. The choice of simple expression, preferring the drab over the golden, reflects the mood of his age also.

The gloomy vision becomes darker and bleaker in successive poems when the suffering becomes intense. The poet tries at moments to cast off the pall of gloom and struggles to free himself from the feeling of loneliness. Here is Poem VI (TWS 17):

Kick up the fire, and let the flames break loose
To drive the shadows back;
Prolong the talk on this or that excuse,
Till the night comes to rest
While some high bell is beating two O'clock
Yet when the guest
Has stepped into the windy street, and gone,
Who can confront
The instantaneous grief of being alone?
Or watch the sad increase
Across the mind of this prolific plant,
Dumb idleness?

The speaker desires to prolong the talk of the guest, to keep back the shadows and to keep the fire burning. But no companionship remains for ever. And so, when the guest leaves, 'the instantaneous grief' that seizes the poet; the intolerable loneliness have to be borne. The effort to prolong that which by nature is transient ends in futility. Grief and loneliness are inevitable; the permanent loneliness has to be faced. Sadness is so deep-rooted and loneliness so inalienable a part of his nature that every attempt to evoke or maintain the mood of joy and celebration is foredoomed to failure and disillusionment. But this sadness in the early poems of The North Ship is apparently too nebulous, and not rooted in any specific situation, and therefore not quite convincing.
Terry Whalen observes:

'It is obvious that the early *The North Ship* is quite pale, not to mention unconsciously amusing, in its youthful and contrived sadness - 'There is regret. Always, there is regret.' (TNS 37)\(^1\)

But there is a unique quality about Larkin's sadness. Eric Homberger's description of him as 'the saddest heart in the post-war supermarket'\(^2\) is based on a simplistic and narrowly circumscribed view of his poetry. Larkin is a 'complex personality' and has more positive leanings than most critics attribute to him. Larkin himself testifies:

'The impulse for producing a poem is never negative; the most negative poem in the world is a very positive thing to have done'.\(^3\)

Poem IX (TNS 21) may strike one apparently as a gloomy poem. But there is a deeper significance in it:


Climbing the hill within the deafening wind
The blood unfurled itself, was proudly borne
High over meadows where white horses stood;
Up the steep woods it echoed like a horn
Till at the summit under shining trees
It cried: Submission is the only good;
Let me become an instrument sharply stringed
For all things to strike music as they please.

How to recall such music, when the street
Darkens? Among the rain and stone places
I find only an ancient sadness falling,
Only hurrying and troubled faces,
the walking of girls' vulnerable feet,
The heart in its own endless silence kneeling.

The poet's heart in an elated and joyful mood cries out, "Submission is the only good". The gloom is apparently lightened and the poet tends to submission and acceptance of outward reality. But this is a fleeting emotion. For when darkness descends all the intellectual doubts return, bringing with them 'the ancient sadness' and 'endless silence'. His irrepressible nature takes over. And as he strains to remember, he muses if it is possible to recall such music and how. Among the rain
The use of two adjectives 'ancient' and 'endless' suggests that he has accepted sadness almost as his true nature and any attempt to shake himself free from it is predestined to failure. Nothing seems to succeed in awakening and sustaining the throbbing rhythm of life in him.

In the poem 'Ugly Sister' (WLS 31), a similar submission to 'silence' is portrayed through the loneliness of a misfit who has been side-stepped by a few common-place experiences of adolescence:

I will climb thirty steps to my room,  
Lie on my bed;  
Let the music, the violin, cornet and drum  
Drowse from my head.
Since I was not bewitched in adolescence
And brought to love,
I will attend to the trees and their gracious silence,

To winds that move.

The reader can almost visualize the dejected figure
wearily climbing the steps — thirty, to be precise. Counting
of steps has become a ritual of drudgery. The failure
to be bewitched by love has brought her to solitude and
silence. She sees her situation reflected in the silence
of the trees unmoved by the moving winds. The adjective
'gracious' barely saves the poem from being a picture of
depression and dereliction.

This inability to be bewitched by love is a common
theme of the Movement poets. It seemed impossible for the
post-war youth to be rapturous about or have deep faith in
the romantic experience. The years that followed the war
made for a diminution of all areas of experience. Life
itself appeared to be shrinking and it was difficult,
(though not impossible), to maintain a heroic or grand
faith in anything, even personal relationships. Larkin
writes in his Introduction to *Jill*, "At an age when self-
importance would have been normal, events cut us ruthlessly
Poem XXI (TNS 34) portrays an experience similar to the one in Poem I (TNS 22). The bleakness of the atmosphere is established through 'black' and 'dead flowers' and 'dark' and 'desolate' room. The second stanza describes a journey into the innermost recesses of the poet's mind:

I was sleeping, and you woke me
To walk on the chilled shore
Of a night with no memory,
Till your voice forsok my ear
Till your two hands withdrew
And I was empty of tears,
On the edge of a bricked and streeted sea
And a cold hill of stars.

Here everything is frozen and chilled. The sea itself is 'bricked' and 'streeted', suggesting that the young poet's flowing emotions and passions have been chilled and numbed. His imagination has been robbed of its colour.

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and the poet feels deprived even of his tears. Again
Poem XVI (THS 28) the poet speaks of the tedium wearing
out of the night, the mechanical love-making ('love and
its commerce over'); in the small hours of the morning,
he is:

So sick, that I can half-believe
The soundless river pouring from the cave
Is neither strong, nor deep;
Only an image fancied in conceit.

So drained is he of any significant emotion that even
the river seems devoid of its strength and depth; it is
reduced to a poor image conceived by his fancy. Is there
any reality beyond the drabbest sort? Perhaps there is
nothing to time but its mere passing; in the previous
stanza he is seen restlessly checking the hands on the dial
of his watch. The numbness is not the numbness that follows
high ecstasy or sharp pain; rather, it is a state of dull-
ness and apathy, when all beauty and meaning seem dubious,
perhaps non-existent. The punishing nature of the experi-
ence is that the poet is in a state of 'half-belief'; he
is neither the unaware, average sensual man, nor the poet
of a fine frenzy. He inhabits rather an in-between, no-
man's land where he senses the tides within him even
while he doubts their very existence. 'The soundless river'
is the poet's image of hushed creativity, but perhaps it
is merely a 'sweet cheat', 'a conceit'.

While sadness and melancholy dominate most of the
poems of the volume, a few poems in *The North Ship* deal
with choice and free will. Larkin, of course explores
these themes fully and in a more mature way in the later
volumes, but already some of the poems in *The North Ship*
do reveal his preoccupation with the relationship between
the free will and commitment: Two poems, in particular,
deal with this theme. Poem XX (NS 32-33) reflects the
speaker's inner struggle to choose between the wild aban-
donment to impulsive joy and a patient nurturing of the
spirit through the dull daily routine. The laughing girl
in the snow and the two ragged old men shovelling snow
symbolize the two possibilities. The poet suggests that
at some stage in his life he may have been drawn towards
such gaiety as imaged by the girl in the snow. But his
essential character is to be committed to his work and his
task. And so 'a sickly hope to be like her' gives 'a
flicker and expires'. His faith is confirmed 'that
everything's remade with shovel and spade'. It is very significant that Larkin at this stage is capable of seeing everyday reality as a foothold for the spirit:

That each dull day and each despairing act
Builds up the crags from which the spirit leaps...

The poem, while discussing two different kinds of responses to life, is also concerned with the creative process. The drably routine image of the old man is capable of bringing his mind to a high pitch, and by recourse to such 'crags' perhaps the imagination may take hold of him. This is made clear by the extraordinary closing image of the poem:

If I can keep against all argument
Such image of a snow white unicorn,
Then as I pray it may for sanctuary
Descend at last to me,
And put into my hand its golden horn.

The snow-white unicorn, the mythical beast may translate itself into a reality, if it chose to 'descend' to his imagination and allow him to take hold of its 'golden horn', become amenable to his grasp. He seems to echo the Keatsian
conviction that 'what the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth'. 21

This concern about the creativity of art is manifested again in the last poem of this volume: 'Waiting for breakfast' (TMS 48). Here the choice is between 'perfection of life and of work', to borrow Yeats's term. The speaker has spent the night with the girl and is waiting for her while she brushes her hair. As he looks out of the window, the world outside appears at first colourless and desolate. But unexplained something transforms the drabness: is it perhaps the tentative return of the imagination? The hotel yard is seen at first as 'empty' and the cobblestones send 'no light back to the loaded sky'. The poet's instant reaction is that it has been a 'featureless morning' and a 'featureless night'.

But then he becomes aware of his misjudgment. This is no ordinary morning; it has been no ordinary night; something is coming to life within. He begins mysteriously

to regain his 'lost lost world', the world of poetry and inspiration. The situation is paradoxical: though new creativity springs from appeased sexual desire, the poet goes on to wonder whether his muse is so possessive that he has to send her away, not commit himself to the very girl who has given him this happy release. That is, the imagination feeds on romantic love, yet must break free of it. Inspiration has to be nourished as tenderly and patiently as an all-demanding invalid or baby; in its turn it will reveal something of its holy sanctified nature (part invalid, part baby and part saint). Significantly Larkin uses a religious term to describe the Muse even if a 'sanctuary' would be that of animals. There he had imagined a unicorn:

Then as I pray it may for sanctuary
Descend at last to me,

If he takes seriously his vocation as poet, he seems to say in the later poem 'waiting for breakfast', perhaps everything else may have to be sacrificed at the altar of the Goddess - even love. 'Are you jealous of her' he asks his Muse. As early in his development as this, then, Larkin is concerned with choosing.
A few poems in The North Ship deal with the theme of time and its effect on the poet. Poem I (TNS 11-12) in a forced Yeatsian manner attempts to celebrate seasonal cycles and renewal, while its refrain harps on the imminence of wintriness and death. Whether the poet is exhorting all creation to rejoice and be glad and to live fully the present moment because the tapping of the drum reminds us of the fleeting nature of life; or whether he is asserting the vanity of such joy in the face, or rather within a hearing distance of, the tapping of the wintry drum, is not made clear. The poem merely juxtaposes stanzas of a somewhat vague wild joy with a bleak and somewhat melodramatic refrain.

Poem XXVI (TNS 39) expresses his thoughts in the manner of an Yeatsian epigram:

This is the first thing
I have understood;
Time is the echo of an axe
Within a wood.

The North Ship being the work of a young and developing artist suffers from limitations. The poet may be in search of his authentic voice but he has not succeeded in casting off his influences. Also his deliberate and
conscious efforts to arrive at the truth are all too apparent. The net result is frequently strained and forced, as in the opening poem of the volume. The total impact of these poems is of conscious labouring; they lack natural ease and smooth flow and reveal the self-consciousness of an artist trying to work up his feeling and emotions to create an atmosphere.

The poems, on the whole, give a slightly exaggerated and melodramatic importance to self. This excessive self-indulgence tends to wear out sympathy in the reader and the constant complaining note of the personal pain verges on self-pity. His disenchantment appears a little unreal and that of a very romantic young man. The melancholy and anguish expressed tend to turn into assumed attitudes instead of felt experiences. The volume's overall vagueness and uncertainty do leave one dissatisfied.

Many of the poems lack particularity. There are no realistic settings and the poet creates only moods and landscapes evocative of a vague melancholy. They fail to establish real objects and incidents as they exist; instead they present them with a coloured romanticism and
sentimentality. The poet 'poeticises too much and the poems advertise themselves somewhat'.

The vagueness and uncertainty of the poems in The North Ship arises also from the fact that too many questions are asked. While they cause perplexity, they seldom move beyond that level, and succeed only in conveying the haziness of the poet's inner state of mind. Poem III (TNS 14) has the poet wondering on a moonlit night of unearthly beauty:

What if it has drawn up
All quietness and certitude of worth
Wherewith to fill its cup,
Or mint a second moon, a paradise? —

The question is answered by himself. But answer is a bleak one: the moon has sucked up all quietness, and certitude of worth.

Questions of all kinds come up — some are answers in themselves as in Poem VI (TNS 21) when he says: 'How to recall such music when the street darkens?'

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23 Lolette Duby, op.cit., p.163.
These questions continue throughout the volume, reaching a quasi-metaphysical height as in Poem XXVIII (TNS 41):

Is it for now or for always,
The world hangs on a stalk?
Is it a trick or a trysting-place,
The woods we have found to walk?

Such doubts are never resolved and the poet remains in this sort of a perpetual perplexity, for even the last poem (TNS 48) of the volume ends with a question:

...... Are you jealous of her?
Will you refuse to come till I have sent
Her terribly away, importantly live
Part invalid, part baby, and part saint?

Vagueness of mood, emotionalism and sentimentality, lack of particularity, and the sense of conscious labouring are then the obvious shortcomings of The North Ship. But those are harsh strictures to pass on a collection which is acknowledged as the juvenilia of a developing poet. Its chief interest lies in the fact that it reveals the process of a poet in the making. Even at this early stage, Larkin shows great technical skill. In Poem II (TNS 13) he demonstrates his ability to sound conversational within a tight formal framework.
In Poem VII (THS 18) the lines of the first stanza are so regular and well balanced that it sounds like a hymn in praise of natural beauty:

The horns of the morning
Are blowing, are shining,
The meadows are bright
With the coldest dew;
The dawn reassembles.
Like the clash of gold cymbals
The sky spreads its vans out
The sun hangs in view.

But the subtle change in the second stanza breaks this swinging, regular rhythm. Talking of his hopeless self, the poet reverses his accents:

Here, where no love is,
All that was hopeless

The rhythemic shift indicates the difference between the glory of the morning and the pale thing that he is only to reassert the original rhythmic pattern when he indicates that his doubts are on the point of vanishing - so overpowering is the beauty of the morning. This is
suggested by the restoration of the earlier swing and balance:

And kept me from sleeping
Is frail and unsure
For never so brilliant,
Neither so silent
Nor so unearthly, has
Earth grown before.

As the poet describes the singularity and uniqueness of the night he brings it to a close with a strong spondee:

Earth grown before

Some poems in *The North Ship* are exquisite lyrics. Poem XIII (TWS 25) is an achievement that shows Larkin's control over manner and matter:

I put my mouth
Close to running water:
Flow north, flow south,
It will not matter,
It is not love you will find.
I told the wind:
It took away my words:
It is not love you will find,
Only the bright-tongued birds,
Only a moon with no home.

It is not love you will find:
You have no limbs
Crying for stillness, you have no mind
Trembling with seraphim,
You have no death to come.

The lines flow easily and the rhythm matches the mood.

The poet knew that 'the wind' and 'the water' cannot experience 'love' for they lack the restlessness of 'mind' and yearnings of 'limbs'. Body and mind are the prerequisites for love and life; wind and water, which have neither, are free. Whether this is loss or gain is left uncertain; the poet is, as usual, irresolute. While the 'limbs cry for stillness' and the wind 'trembles with seraphim'; are the wind and water, to be pitied because they lack such limbs and mind? On the other hand, their movement (of blowing) are free and unrestricted; is that then enviable? And what does one make of the 'bright-tongued birds' and 'the
wondering moon' that seems to belong to wind and water? Perhaps they stand for some cold abstract ideal of beauty far removed from the flesh and even the soul. The poem rather delicately balances this uncertainty about the painful but ecstatic thing it is to be alive.

Thus The North Ship has more hopeful notes than are to be heard in the next two volumes and the poet is still capable in some way of celebrating 'joy'. The gloom and darkness are still at a distance and hopelessness slightly removed. The volume differs in tone from the next two volumes which exhibit Larkin's characteristically dull and dark world.