**THE NORTH SHIP: IMPLYING FRIGHTENING IMPLICATIONS**

*The North Ship*, published in 1945, is not more than juvenilia. Larkin himself accepts his beginning efforts as impressions of three major poets:

Looking back, I find in the poems not are abandoned self but several – the ex-schoolboy, for whom Auden was the, only alternative to ‘old – fashioned poetry’: the undergraduate, whose work a friend affable characterised as ‘Dylan Thomas’; but you’ve a sentimentality that’s all your own and the immediate post-Oxford self, isolated in Shropshire with a complete Yeats stolen from, the local girls School. This search for a style was merely one aspect of general immaturity.

*(Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces, 1955-1982, 28)*

Despite Larkin’s admission, one can find no trace of Dylan Thomas in *The North Ship*: Anthony Thwaite commenting on this said that he could find no trace of Dylan Thomas in *The North Ship* but Yeats was certainly impressionable to Larkin and there are marks of obvious influence, for E.g. the poem “XX”. The central idea of “Sailing to Byzantium” –

An aged man is but a paltry thing,

A tattered coat upon a stick, unless

Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
For every tatter in its mortal dress

(Collected Poems, 217)

is resonant in Larkin as –

I can

Never in seventy years be more a man

Than now as a sack of meal upon two sticks.

(The North Ship, 32)

For Larkin the single poet was Yeats and he said –

I spent the next three years trying to write like Yeats, not because I like his personality or understood the ideas but out of infatuation with his music ... It is particularly potent music, pervasive as garlic and has ruined many a better talent.

(Required Writing, 29)

When interviewed by Ian Hamilton he described these poems as "Yeats-y" in themes, attitude and style. Motion describes The North Ship as a collection absorbed in generalized sadness – a feature so common to Yeats. He adds-

They frequently borrow direct from Yeats, and general resemblances abound. Their mood is invariably gloomy without justification, their time of day dawn or dusk, then weather cold, rainy and windy, and their symbolic details monotonous:
water, stars, ice, ships, candles dreams, hands and beds occur with extraordinary frequency and no distinguishing feature.

(Philip Larkin, 33)

These poems were written soon after he fell in love with Ruth Brown who later announced to the world after Larkin’s death that “Over the years of our relationship I sadly come to accept that depression and melancholy were more natural to him than happiness and optimism”.

(Philip Larkin: A Writer’s Life, 122)

His lift with his bosom friend Bruce Montgomery added much to his self criticism, depression and loneliness. These are some of the reasons which gave a colour of maudlin melancholy to The North Ship.

“I put my mouth” is sentimental whispering of the speaker who in the state of lovelessness speaks first to the running water and then to the wind. The images of chirping birds and a homeless moon objectifies the poet/speaker’s forlorn state. In these images the poet attempts to find a shelter.

To comfort his depressed state of mind the poet, in the last stanza, draws a distinction between himself and the mind in terms of what it possesses and what it does not. The disqualifications are numbered as –

You have no limbs

Crying for stillness, you have no mind
Trembling with seraphim,

You have no death to come.

(LP, 276)

Lack of angelic beauty and the approach of inevitable death leaves the poet pathetic.

This vein of sentimentality can also be noticed in ‘I dreamed of an out-thrust arm of land”. The poem is addressed to his lady love, who is asleep along with the poet/speaker. In his sleep the speaker dreamed of a beautiful landscape – a plot of sea-side land where sea-gulls are flying over ‘a wave”. The wind travels to the upland, the caves and moves into a garden to finally break around his house, where he and his beloved were enjoying a sound sleep. The poet/speaker is then pulled out of his dream by none other than his beloved –

To walk on the chilled shore

Of a night with no memory,

Till your voice forsook 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.

(LP, 267)
The connotations of negative words leaves the poet’s dream into a nightmare. A sense of deprivation fill him with a sense of being unworthy or belonginglessness. Indefinite state of mind is here interestingly and emphatically evoked with the help of indefinite articles. This theme of loss of love is repeated again in “Morning has spread again”. The rise of new day changes the lovers into strangers who wonder if “love can have already set/In dreams; when we’ve not met/Moe times than I can number on one hand” (280). The speaker/lover is hesitant about the very thoughts of acknowledging their love as they have not met more times. He cannot ever forget that they have misused the opportunity of illuminating love into reality because of his nervousness, as a result his love died within their hearts.

Even though the poet/lover/speaker talks about their being strangers. Yet he does not start afresh. The memory of his beloved looms large on his consciousness whereby he could not forget what happened last night. The poem points to the fact that the lovers have consciously worked for the erosion of their love and that they had seriousness in relationship.

Opposite to this feeling is the poem “Is it for now or for always” in which the lover speaker is intensely elated in the company of his beloved. So satisfying is his relation that the world appears symmetrical to him as a flower hanging on a stalk. Tossed between appearance and reality, the lover-speaker wonders whether the woods they have walked into is really a locale of their meeting. He doubts his kissing of the beloved as a ‘mirage’ or something really expected out of togetherness. The sun appears, as a ball in the hands of a juggler which is reflective of the wonder he feels in
the world of love. In the last stanza, the beloved assume an aura of
angel and the poet/lover cries out –

Shine out, my sudden angel,

Break fear with breast and brow

I take you now and for always,

For always is always now.

(CP, 296)

The last stanza is marked with tonal ambiguity because of the
antithetical lexical items like “now – always”, “trick - trysting”,
“Mirage – miracle” and “Sham-sign”

Love’s cheerfulness is set against disgust with love in “The
bottle is drunk out by one”. Here the poet suffers from acute
insomnia and performs nocturnal rituals. Hours are mathematically
detailed for various activities like drinking, reading, copulation etc.
in a matter of fact manner. Dullness and mechanicality of love and
life are detailed with much specificity:

The bottle is drunk, out by one

At two, the book is shut;

At three the lover lies apart,

Love and its commerce done;

(CP, 277)

The speaker’s insomnia is so distressing that it makes him
sceptical of the registers of his senses –
And I am sick for want of sleep;
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.

(CP. 277)

The poem reminds one of Eliot’s ‘Rhapsody on a Windy Night’ in its mode of recording the flux of time –

Twelve o’clock
Along the reaches of the street
Held in a lunar synthesis...

Half past one,
The street lamp sputtered...

Half past two,
The street-lamp said....

Half past three
The lamp sputtered...
In similar fashion Eliot’s poet-speaker too longs for sleep but he also is troubled by the meaninglessness of life and feels about for something that will sustain him. This feeling is effectively evoked through the choice of words. A contrast is held between the speaker’s objective distancing and subjective involvement by passivised verbs in the first stanza and active in the second.

Parting comes as a theme in “Love we must part now”. Here the lover/speaker directly addresses his beloved to maintain her balanced state of mind during the hour of parting. In the past their affair had been full of sentimentality but now they should be “free” of it. He urges that also attachments be severed but without a sense of hostility and bitterness. He demands mutual understanding and propriety of behaviour while taking up divergent courses in their lives—

There is regret. Always, there is regret.

But it is better that our lives unloose,

As two tall ships, wind-mastered, wet with light,

Break from an estuary with their courses set,

And waving part, and waving drop from sight.

(Discontinuation of the affair is worked out with easy and day — to-day images. Inadequacy in love is referred to with much simplicity as if it is a common regular happening —

\textit{(The Complete Poems & Plays of T.S. Eliot, 24)}
Never were hearts more eager to be free,
To kick down worlds, lash forests; you and I
No longer hold them; we are husks, that see
The grain going forward to a different use.

(CP, 280)

Thus the poem begins with the speaker/lover declaring his
intention to part but without any fuss that lapses into gushy
sentimentality.

Another poem in which the poet’s heart looms with the angst
that accompanies is “Within the dream you said”-

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—driver bird
Nor frost—encircled root
As cold as my heart.

(CP, 299)
The beloved says that they must not meet again since all’s done. These words nag the poet of its warmth and it strikes him with absence of love. In this state of helplessness and hopelessness he watches the images of the lambs braving the winter, the bird struggling against the “gale” and the “root” enduring the frost. But the poet/speaker remains passive and is in a state of neither living nor struggling.

Lovelessness is the theme of the “If hands could free you, man!” “Heart” is apostrophized as to imply a dialogue with heart. Once the body liberates the heart, it could soar away from the warmth of the earthly life and run “through fields, pit valleys” and meet all that which is beautiful under the sun. But this journey would be no profit for it is bound to end in loss. The sense of loss makes the poet/speaker demand self-pity – “I should find no bent arm, no bed/To rest my head.(294)

Larkin’s obsession with drabness, meaninglessness and drudgery of life along with self pity finds expression in “One man walking a deserted platform”. The speaker sees a lonely man walking a deserted platform and waiting anxiously for the train which rain is “driving across a darkening autumn”. The speaker’s thought veers round to the man who nourishes an untraceable “ambition” to be perpetually travelling each dawn which is possibly devised to beguile the hour “when lovers re-embrace” in the bed. The “dark silk of dreams” suggests the meaningless world of illusions that love creates. In this “the abstract” and “the concrete” are juxtaposed to project the life of the opposites. Motion believes that this poem was prophetic about Larkin’s future in craftsmanship:
The poem may be said to contain the seeds of Larkin's maturer poetry in two respects—first, in its vivid realistic setting and secondly, in the speaker's sympathetic identification with another individual.

*(Philip Larkin, 193)*

The thought of death is the major thematic preoccupation of Larkin in *The North Ship*. Death is the end of all that is achieved on earth. It is a cruel menacing reality that turns all efforts futile and unproductive at the fact of the immortality of spirit.

‘*All Catches Alight*’

Structured in four stanzas the poem is a long list of concrete pictures of the richness of the world of nature. The bounties of nature seem “nothing” at the face of decay and death. Birds in their joy of high soars, leaves, mounting upto light and all living creatures like birds, beasts, plants, trees and man join the process of enjoyment. They celebrate the death, defying sense of impendingness to life whereby the pangs of sorrow and anxiety become less-annoying. The poet/speaker desires that all beings should forget their past and all dead be resurrected so that the threat of nullification is obliterated -

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 man
Stand on the earth again.

(CP, 272-73)

But the beats of the “Wintry drum” threatens the prevail of all
joy no matter how intense to assert the inevitability of death. This
poem reminds one of Yeats for the Yeatsian gyre here appears as
wheel representing the concept of time.

“Like the train’s beat” is a poem that speaks about infatuation or
precisely sexual attraction. The poet/speaker is travelling in a
railway compartment and his gaze catches sight of a polish girl who
is talking to her companion. The poet fails to understand her
vivacious talk as she is alien to her tongue but is attracted to her
physical charms.

Like the train’s beat
Swift language flutters the lips
Of the polish airgirl in the corner seat.
The swinging and narrowing sun.
Lights her eyelashes, shapes
Her sharp vivacity of bone
Hair, wild and controlled, runs back:
And gestures like these English oaks
Flash past the windows of her foreign talk.
The poet/speaker awaits the girl mouthing some English words in the course of her foreign talk. As the oaks flash past the window as the train moves, so do English words flash throughout her conversation with her companion. Here the metaphor describes the abstract and the uncommon in a concrete mode.

“The moon is full tonight” appears as a compensation for the love and bliss in the world in the abundance of moonlight.

The moon is full tonight

And hurts the eyes

It is so definite and bright.

But the fullness of the moon is a sharp glare to the eyes causing inconvenience. The soothing effect of the moon is nullified by its hurting effect.

The poet/speaker adds further a new idea to the harsh image of the moon:

What if it has drawn up

All quietness and certitude of worth

Wherewith to fill its cup,

Or mint a second moon, a paradise?

For they are gone from earth.
Ironically, the cup of moonlight is filled with all “quietness” — a state of peace and tranquility when a colour of sentimentality is affiliated to it. The poet clubs paradoxically bliss to the “second moon” — an abode of those who are no longer on earth. Lolette likely notes this as a creative failure for the poetic imagery is no better than confused contemplation — a product of his personal sense of deprivations and his failure to internalise the external world.

“Heaviest of flowers, the head” is a complex poem of this collection for the words are less transparent in reflecting the feelings contained. The poem reads as —

Heaviest of flowers, the head
Forever hangs above a stormless bed;
Hands that the heart can govern
Shall be at last by darker hands unwoven;
Every exultant sense
Unstrung to silence
The sun drift away
And all the memories that best
Run back beyond this season of unrest
Shall lie upon the earth
That gave them birth.
Like fallen apples, they will lose
Their sweetness at the bruise
And then decay.

"Heaviest" implies something oppressive and "a stormless cell" – a place of comfort away from the tumult of activity. The taut language suggests the state of no rest and "darker hands" are instruments of death. The drifting away of the sun represents the movement of time suggesting life approaching eternal rest. "Fallen supplies" represent "memories" and "bruise" implies loss of grace caused by rough earth – the deathbed. The poem, is therefore one of mundanity and oppressive melancholy.

"I see a girl dragged by the wrists" shows a young girl enjoying with her lover in a physical activity. She is dragged by her lover who is willing to submit, as she laughs and struggles, and promises no "fight". The speaker reflects, upon the time when such a night could have filled him with jealousy but his advance age does not make him feel so. The carefree joyousness does not titillate him, he remains complete insensitive to it. He continues to walk reflecting on his present state of health:

What poor mortar and bricks
I have to build with, knowing that I can
Never in seventy years be more a man
Than now – a sack of meal upon two sticks.

(CP, 282)

(CP, 278)
While walking, he counters another sight—two old ragged men clearing the drifts with shovels and spade. This teaches him a lesson of endurance and the memory of the girl is swept clear from his heart. Though endurance is a painstaking resort to regain the joys of former life but is not impossible. Life with flux of time needs in strength after having reached the prime—

All that’s content to wear a worn-out coat,
All actions done in patient hopelessness,
All that ignore the silence of death,
Thinking no further than the hand can hold,
All that grows old,
Yet works on uselessly with shortened breath.

(CP, 279)

He assures himself of “Subtle” knowledge and emotion—
That everything’s remade
With shovel and spade;
That each dull day and each despairing act
Builds up the crags from which the spirit leaps.

(CP, 279)

To Timms, the poem is a close semblance to three of Yeats’ poems—“Sailing to Byzantium”, “The Tower” and “A Dialogue of Self and Soul”. The narrative technique is similar to “The Tower” the self-questioning mode of dialogue with ‘A Dialogue of Self and
Nevertheless the poem makes an impressive reading because of its narrative and contemplative modes. Symbolism is another beauty of the poem. For E.g. the girl playing with her lover on ‘shovel’ juxtaposes happiness and unhappiness as integral features of life. The efforts of the old ragged man projects perseverance and musical fortitude to combat all -knocking hopelessness. “Shovel” and “Spade” symbolize, therefore strength and patience to rebuild life. The image of unicorn – the mythical animal is a picture of unswerving determination and its ‘golden horn’ represents the world of art and counters the frustration of life. Salem K. Hassan appreciates the poem as –

“...a noticeable verbal energy derived from Larkin’s belief in the validity of ordinary life. Here, there are no rhetorical statements of the sort we counter in some poems of this book …”

*(Philip Larkin and His contemporaries, 11)*

Art is repetitive theme in another poem of this volume “Ugly sister”, It details the plight of an ugly woman whose ugliness has made her a jinx. Nobody loves her and nobody accepts her love. She lives a life of abject lovelessness and loneliness. With no one to claim and no one to reciprocate, she seeks refuge in the world of “music” in the foliage of the vegetative world and in the gentility of wind:

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

(CP. 292)

The picture of loneliness evoked in the first stanza is not only frightening but also distasteful. The dispassionate dryness with which the ugly lady enlists her daily cares reflects upon the abject boredom that has gnawed her joviality. Her only and only colour of life is drudgery a colourless, meaningless living. Her loneliness has no effective anchorage except the adoption of philosophical stance to oust profound melancholy. Lexically the poem has a plethora of apt and striking words. “thirty steps” evocatively describes the inner laceration of an ugly lady who counts the steps leading to her room of loneliness and unfriendliness “Since” makes a succinct articulation of her profound melancholy and “graciously silence” brings out her reason to empathise with the beauty of the world.
Undoubtedly, this poem is maturer artefact which anticipates Larkin’s later accomplishments of distinctive merit.
"The Dancer" is another poem relative to art. The poem has a curious beginning – an epigraph spoken by a dancer who stands indecisive at the face of two choices – whether to imitate the movement of a "butterfly" or that of a "falling leaf". Structurally the poem has an interesting form. It is made of two questions followed by an answer. The question is direct in simple overt language but the answer is symbolic in nature:

And if she were to admit
The world weaved by her feet
Is leafless, is incomplete?
And if she abandoned it,
Broke the pivoted dance
Set loose the audience?

(CP, 290)

To this the obscure answer reads as –

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

(CP, 290)

The mode of imitation encapsulates an "illusion" even though of the objects of nature and is therefore 'incomplete'. The artist knows it, yet continues to entertain her audience and to save the
world of reality from a catastrophic end. Knowingly the artist and the audience accept the limitations of art and are comfortable with the "incompleteness" or untruth of the world of reality signified through the mode of art. Geoffrey Harvey evaluates the poem as –

The poet's attitude here is negative, he does not glorify the efficacy of art that sustains the world of reality but slyly hints at the fragility and vulnerability underlying the very essence of the art – world which nourishes the world of reality at the cost of wholeness and truth.

*The Romantic Tradition in the Modern English Poetry, 212*

"Climbing the will within the deafening wind" suggests submission to the glory of nature as the best remedy to the ills of life. The strength of the poem lies in the speaker's realization of a sense of humility at the close of his journey instead of a proud chest and a head held high. Here in lies the profound significance of labour invested for a particular achievement. The poem is superbly charged with positivity – sublime silence as the trophy of unconditional submission.

"Waiting for the breakfast" written in December 1947 was added as a "coda" to the 1966 reprint. The poem is a monologue spoken by a man in a hotel room while the woman with whom he has spent the night is readying herself for breakfast, Steve Clark comments –

One scarcely thinks of sex in relation to the work of Philip Larkin; or to qualify a little, only in
terms of jaundiced disparagement, a fertile source of negation. The erotic Larkin would appear to be pretty meagre fare.

*(Philip Larkin, 94)*

The poem, in clear terms, shows how Larkin has begun to place himself in the world of reality. The speaker/lover is looking out of the window whereas the lady is brushing her hair. He looks around and feels a sense of disinterestedness. This makes him recall the taste of last night which he now realizes to be a “featureless” one.

In the succeeding stanza he experience a feel of joy and his “disinterestedness” changes into a passionate interest in her –

... Turning, I kissed her,

Easily for sheer joy tipping the balance to love.

*(CP, 20)*

The third stanza presents a conflict between the woman and the rival who is interpreted by critics like Andrew Motion and A. Thwaite as the Muse. In fit to kiss the girl, the speaker realizes that it has offered the renderings of creative impetus:

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, 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?

(CP, 20)

These questions offer two choices – either the real world of the physical world or the muse – an embodiment of grace from the world of imagination. The muse is both a gift and a celestial inspiration. In short, the poem is all about writing poetry. Swarbrick appreciates the quality of the poem as –

"Possesses it own kind of romanticism and returns to precisely the same preoccupation as the rest of The North Ship: the relationship between life and art.

(Out of Reach, 26)

Here Larkin shows his skill at creating specific situations in which focussed feelings could be vividly described – a style Larkin had learnt from Hardy. It projects as Roger Day rightly says "... a real conflict felt in personal terms and the "I" in the poem sounds like a real person, not someone playing the “part of the poet". (Philip Larkin, 28)

The titular poem The North Ship is a sequence of fine short poems with an allegorical – narrative framework. One introduces the north ship depicted in a pattern to journey of three ships, one is
distinguished from the other two right in the first stanza. The first ship is on a journey to the west and is propelled by a favourable mind to a rich country whereas the second goes into the opposite direction – to the east and faces the hostility of the wind. The third ship is the north ship that travels for an adventure –

... Went wide and far

Into an unforgiving sea

Under a fire spilling star,

And it was rigged for a long journey.

(CP, 302)

Compared to the first two ships the north ship is given a colour of significance, more so is elevated to the level of a legend. The ship is symbolically representative of the human conditions in which the ship stands for individual the sea for life and the wind projects the odds of life constituting circumstantial problems. The north ship is representative of an existence that encounters the hazards and proves its fortitude towards the process of journey. In contrast, the two ships are on a different level of meaning – The west ship moves effortlessly whereas the east ship fights all hazards but in vain.

The second poem shifts the focus from the ship to the mindscape of the narrator who happens to be a member of the crew. The speaker is haunted by a recurrent nightmare which warns him against his ship being perilously struck in the sea. The third section “Fortunetelling” show the ship moving to North where the narrator
happens to meet a fortune-teller who predicts his having an erotic experiences with a girl:

... Sleep is made cold
By a recurrent dream
Where all things seem
Sickeningly to poise
On emptiness, on stars
Drifting under the world.

\[(CP. 303)\]

The fourth, titled "Blizzard" objectifies the tumult in the speaker's mind as he gathers the image of the girl -- "Who will take no lovers/Till she winds me in her hair (305). The muddledom of the speaker is further intensified by a drunken boatswain singing -- "A woman has ten claws" -- a picture of terrific sexual commitment.

Thus "The North Ship" began with an attempt to explore life but closes on the note of sexual obsession of the speaker with a female lover. All through the length of the poem, the female figure remains a fantasy figure and never appears in flesh and blood in the real world. Swarbrick rightly comments:

The poem's dreamy evocation of remote coldness merging with sexual fear suggests how Larkin used the Yeatsian model as a way of externalizing and mythologizing his own psychology.

\[(Out of Reach, 25)\]
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