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LARKIN'S SPRINGBOARDS: THE POET IN THE MAKING

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ABSTRACT: *Philip Larkin is a key figure in the post-war British poetry. This "effective unofficial Laureate of the post-1945 England" remains the "central figure in British Poetry over the last twenty years." Larkin's reputation rose to an extent where "even his detractors are now naming him a major poet." Writing in the 1970s, David Timms calls him the "best poet England now has." In the 1980s, commenting on the sales of Larkin's volumes, Roger Day terms him an "immensely popular poet" by "contemporary standards." In this essay, an attempt will be made to trace what provided springboards to the making of the poet Larkin.*

KEYWORDS: British Poetry, Post-Fifties, Philip Larkin, the making of.

INTRODUCTION

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists … we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously. (Eliot, *Essays*14-5)

As a guiding principle I believe that every poem must be its own sole freshly created universe, and therefore have no belief in 'tradition' or a common myth-kitty or casual allusions in poems to other poems or poets, which last I find unpleasantly like the talk of literary understrappers letting you see they know the right people. A poet's only guide is his own judgement; if that is defective his poetry will be defective, but he had still better judge for himself than listen to anyone else. (Larkin, *Required* 79)

Philip Larkin emerged as a key figure in the post-war British poetry. This "effective unofficial Laureate of the post-1945 England" remains the "central figure in British Poetry over the last twenty years"(Davie 64). Larkin's reputation rose to an extent where "even his detractors are now naming him a major poet"(Whalen 1). Writing in the 1970s, David Timms calls him the "best poet England now has"(1). In the 1980s, commenting on the sales of Larkin's volumes, Roger Day terms him an "immensely popular poet" by "contemporary standards"(9). In this essay, an attempt will be made to trace what provided springboards to the making of the poet Larkin.

In "Tradition and the Individual Talent" T.S.Eliot says (the quotation with which this essay starts) every writer is bound to get influenced by others. Nevertheless, in his *Required Writing*, which may be deemed his poetic manifesto, Larkin seems to be dismissing (the second quotation) this claim. But if we trust "the tale" and not "the artist" (Lawrence 2) we can locate some obvious influences that help Larkin shape his poetic perception. The next few pages of this essay will try to uncover those influences on Larkin.

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The first period of Larkin's poetic career, up to 1943, belongs to Auden. The second, between 1943 and 1946, belongs to Yeats (*The North Ship* period). The third belongs to Hardy and proceeds to *The Less Deceived* (though there is a gap between 1946 and 1950). But apart from these three distinct phases, there remains several other names playing vital role in building up the poetics of Larkin.

At the beginning of his career as a poet, W. H. Auden was the "only alternative" for Larkin to "old-fashioned" poetry (*Required* 28). It was, however, the early Auden that Larkin had his admiration for, for after 1939, in his view, Auden became over literary and out of touch with day-to-day life.

Auden's influence could be traced in Larkin's "Conscript." Dedicated to Larkin's friend James Ballard Sutton, the poem is about getting involved in war. The very subject matter of the poem is Audenesque, so is the treatment as well. The poem shows how the persona was initially living in peace and cosy comfort:

> The ego's county he inherited
>
> From those who tended it like farmers…
>
> (*Collected Poems* 262; henceforth referred to as *CP*)

However, with the advent of war "his land was violated." Goaded by the ideal of "self-effacement" he gave his "assent" to join the war despite the possibilities of "his own defeat and murder." David Timms observes a sort of "cultivated toughness" in Larkin's language and also finds a "hint of the psychological jargon" (23) characteristic of Auden's early work. Following Auden's *In Time of War* Larkin divides his poem into three quatrains and a couplet on the page. That's why Timms concludes that Larkin's "Conscript" is "squarely based" (23) on the poems of Auden's volume. In its use of geographical image (e.g. "The ego's county"), asserts Chatterjee (62), the poem recalls Auden's "He watched the stars and noted birds in flight" (poem "VI" of "Sonnets from China"):

> Falling in love with Truth before he knew Her,
>
> He rode into imaginary lands,
>
> By solitude and fasting hoped to woo Her,
>
> And mocked at those who served Her with their hands. (151)

The very tone of the poem and the technique of using "good"/ "bad" abstractions, he further remarks, are Audenesque. Apart from "Conscript", the influence of Auden is traceable in Larkin's early sonnets like "Ultimatum" (1940), "Observation" (1941), "A Writer" (1941) etc. Lerner describes two *North Ship* poems, namely "The moon is full tonight" and "To write one song, I said" as 'imitations' (10) of Auden. Even some thirty years later in 1972, Auden "surfaces again as an influence in the middle stanzas" (Lerner 10) of Larkin's "The Building." Auden approved Larkin's use of contemporary idiom and imagery.

Vernon Watkins's speech in Larkin's last year at Oxford, 1943, at the Oxford English Club made a tremendous and lasting impression on the budding Larkin. Watkins "swamped" him with Yeats so much so that Larkin started "trying to write like Yeats" (*Required* 29). Larkin wrote to J.B. Sutton in April 1943: "when you come back, you must read a little Yeats: he is

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very good" (*Letters* 56). It was chiefly the music of Yeats that Larkin got infatuated with. Yeats's "potent" music appeared to him "pervasive as garlic" (*Required* 29). Much of Larkin's *The North Ship* (1945) rings with a sort of Yeatsian music and appears almost a "pastiche" (Lerner 10) of Yeats. In the following lines (from "If grief could burnt out") Yeats is clearly present:

> The fire grow silent,
>
> The grey ash soft:
>
> And I stir the stubborn flint
>
> The flames have left,
>
> And grief stirs, and the deft
>
> Heart lies impotent. (*CP* 298)

A deliberate manipulation of rhythm and repetition generates a song-like effect. Roger Day traces a "fundamental similarity" (26) between Yeats and Larkin in the rhetorical manner. However, the influence of Yeats – the "Celtic fever" (*Required* 30) in Larkin's own term – was limited to the younger Yeats (up to 1933) as onto this far the younger Larkin "isolated in Shropshire" (*Required* 28) had his access to. After his initiation into Yeats by Vernon Watkins, Larkin started collecting Yeats's books but admitted that later Yeats was 'scarce' at that time (*Required* 29). The edition of Yeats Larkin was well aware of was the 1933 *Collected Poems* including his work only up to *Words for Music Perhaps* (Timms 26). Though impressed most by the later poems in the collection (from *The Tower* onwards), Larkin is found fascinated more with those of the early Yeats.

Not just in the whole of *The North Ship*, the influence of early Yeats can be detected in the two novels Larkin wrote – *Jill* (1946) and *A Girl in Winter* (1947). In both these novels the principal characters are fond of dreaming – a quality that could be well ascribed to early Yeats. *Jill* is about a shy, working class boy from Huddlesford, John Kemp, who having won a scholarship to Oxford, is faced with two contrasting (and hostile) worlds alien to his experience. Overwhelmed by feelings of social inferiority, Kemp constructs a fantasy sister, "Jill", to whom he writes letter and whose diary he invents. In *A Girl in Winter* the protagonist Katherine Lind, a European girl exiled in England during the War works in a public library. The novel rebuilds her pre-War adolescent association with an English family, the Fennels, whom she visits after a pen-friend correspondence with the boy, Robin. Katherine's first visit ends in an unsatisfactory advance from Robin. Now, after some years, she hears again from Robin and the novel describes the day she is due to meet him. Both novels end with their central characters in some sort of "unsatisfied" (Larkin, *Winter* 7) and "unfulfilled" (Larkin, *Jill* 243) dreams.

Larkin's use of refrain and the rhythm of short, dancing lines is Yeatsian in nature. Larkin's opening poem of *The North Ship* ("All catches alight") can be compared to Yeats's "Her Anxiety" and "The Withering Bough" in this regard. In the poem Larkin welcomes the advent of spring:

> All catches alight
>
> At the spread of spring:

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Birds crazed 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. (*CP* 272; emphasis original)

The use of the dancing rhythm of short lines and refrain is also their in Yeats's "Her Anxiety":

Earth in beauty dressed

Awaits returning spring.

All true love must die,

Alter at the best

Into some lesser thing.

Prove that I lie. (*CP* 270; emphasis original)

Larkin's refrain in the poem "All catches alight" – "*A drum taps: a wintry drum*" also recalls Yeats's "*No boughs have withered because of the wintry wind*" in "The Withering of the Boughs":

I cried when the moon was murmuring to the birds:

'Let peewit call and curlew cry where they will,

I long for your merry and tender and pitiful words,

For the roads are unending, and there is no place to my mind.'

The honey-pale moon lay low on the sleepy hill,

And I fell asleep upon lonely Echtge of streams.

No boughs have withered because of the wintry wind;

The boughs have withered because I have told them my dreams.

(*CP* 75; emphasis original)

Larkin's refrain in the poem "All catches alight" hints at the ultimate destruction of the vernal beauty at the hands of winter. Philip Gardner takes this as the early manifestation of Larkin's "awareness of sadness at the back of things" and that of "inevitability of death" as well (89). Larkin's use of 'refrain' might be in debt to several such Yeatsian 'refrain'(s) like: "(*All find safety in the tomb*.)"(264-5) in "Crazy Jane and the Bishop"; "*Fol de rol, fol de rol*" (265) in "Crazy Jane Reproved"; "*All things remain in God*" (267) in "Crazy Jane on God"; "*Love is*

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like the lion's tooth" (268-9) in "Crazy Jane Grown Old Looks at the Dancers" or "*From mountain to mountain ride the fierce horsemen*" (344-6) in "Three Songs to the One Burden." Larkin's lines ("Gull, grass and girl/ In air, earth and bed") (*CP* 272) in his "All Catches alight" appear almost a caricature of ("Fish, flesh or fowl, commend all summer long / Whatever is begotten, born and dies") (199) of Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium." Moreover, Larkin has always been preoccupied with the concept of time and in this regard he seems to have acquired Yeats's view of time. Larkin's concept of "wheel" is borrowed from that of Yeatsian gyre (Timms 28):

> *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.
>
> (*CP* 272-3; emphasis added)

Apart from the technique, metrical pattern and stanzaic division, Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium" and "The Tower" lend Larkin's "I see a girl dragged by the wrists" ("XX" of *The North Ship*) its very modus operandi. Thus faced with two different sets of souls, like those in "Sailing to Byzantium" and "The Tower" (Section II), the Larkin-persona finds oneness with "two old ragged men/ Clearing the drifts with shovels and a spade" leaving aside the young girl having fun in the snow:

> Damn all explanatory rhymes!
>
> To be that girl! – but that's impossible;
>
> For me the task's to learn the many times
>
> When I must stoop, and throw a shovelful:
>
> I must repeat until I live the fact
>
> 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)

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When the Larkin-persona declares: "…knowing that I can/ Never in seventy years be more a man/Than now – a sack of meal upon two sticks," one cannot but recall Yeats in "Sailing to Byzantium":

> An aged man is but a paltry thing,
>
> A tattered coat upon a stick… (199)

A similar Yeatsian touch is also perceptible in Larkin's "Plymouth": "The hands that chose them rust upon a stick" (*CP* 307). Apart from the two Yeats-poems already mentioned, the rhyme scheme of Larkin's poem ("I see a girl dragged by the wrists") and the self-questioning manner (Timms 27) are borrowed from Yeats's "A Dialogue of Self and Soul."

Thus, as well as technicalities, Larkin's *The North Ship* borrows its very attitude from Yeats. The view of the creator (poet) that Larkin employs here is Yeatsian in nature. One can either have 'life' or 'art', but not the best of both the worlds:

> The intellect of man is forced to choose
>
> Perfection of the life, or of the work,
>
> And if it take the second must refuse
>
> A heavenly mansion, raging in dark. (CP 254)

As the poet is forced into seclusion in "The Towers", the poet in Larkin (as in "I see a girl dragged by the wrists") is forced into isolation on the "crags" he builds as that is the place where his "spirit leaps." The persona in Larkin's poem "Climbing the hill within the deafening wind" (poem "IX" of *The North Ship*) wants to be an "instrument sharply stringed" so as to "strike music" but fails to find out how to "recall such music, when the street/Darkens" (*CP* 301). The dichotomy between love and separation, society and seclusion, light and shade spread out over the entire volume (*The North Ship*) is Yeatsian in nature. The course of Larkin's "Ugly Sister" is from "love to lovelessness"(Swarbrick 24):

> 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)

Larkin's early poems, especially the love poems, are marked by a "sentimentality of attitude" and a dearth of "particularity" (Timms 28-9) like those of Yeats. In "The Wanderings of Oisin" for example, the beloved (Maud Gonne) fails to emerge a real one:

> A pearl-pale, high-born lady, who rode
>
> On a horse with bridle of findrinny;
>
> And like a sunset were her lips,
>
> A stormy sunset on doomed ships;

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A citron colour gloomed in her hair,

. . .

Of many a figured embroidery; (*CP* 369)

A sort of failure to concretize the idea could also be traced in Larkin's "Is it for now or for always" (poem "XXVIII" of *The North Ship*):

Is it a mirage or miracle,

Your lips that lift at mine: . . .

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 very form of the epigrammatic representation of Larkin's four-lined poem "This is the first thing" (poem "XXVI" of *The North Ship*) is Yeatsian in nature:

This is the first thing

I have understood:

Time is the echo of an axe

Within a wood. (*CP* 295)

An amalgam of coldness and sexual fright discernible in the title-poem of *The North Ship,* is unmistakably Yeatsian. In this series of five short poems, the "north ship" sails into a "darkening", "unforgiving", "birdless" sea only to reach a girl who "will take no lover." When the drunken boatswain declares that a "woman has ten claws", one cannot but notice a Yeatsian voice in operation. According to Blake Morrison, Larkin's habit of addressing and personifying the heart owes much to Yeats. Such Larkinesque expressions like "The *heart* would rest quiet", "the deft/*Heart* lies impotent" (*CP* 298; emphasis added) (in "If grief could burnt out"); "With the unguessed-at *heart* riding"(*CP* 293; emphasis added) (in "One man walking a deserted platform"); "The *heart* in its own endless silence kneeling" (*CP* 301; emphasis added) (in "Climbing the hill within the deafening wind"); "if hands could free you, heart" (*CP* 294; emphasis added) (in "If hands could free you, heart") might have their germ in a Yeats poem like "Never Give All the Heart" ("Never give all the *heart*, for love," "O never give the *heart* outright," "For he gave all his *heart* and lost") (75; emphasis added). Yeats crops up even in a 1953 poem "Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album" (the inaugural poem of *The Less Deceived*). The persona's passionate fantasy over the picture of a young lady ("At last you yielded up the album, which,/Once open, sent me distracted…") (*CP* 71) recalls (Skinner 81) Yeats's musings on the image of Maud Gonne in his "Among Schoolchildren" ("And thereupon my heart is driven wild:/She stands before me as a living child") (222). Yeats's influence is also perceptible in Larkin's preoccupation with time. In Larkin's own language, it was under the joint influence of Yeats and Auden that he learnt the "management of lines" and the "formal distancing of emotion" (*Required* 67).

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Philip Larkin, like most of the Moventeers, found it hard to evade Dylan Thomas's influence. In fact, as an undergraduate, Larkin had been "accused of writing like Thomas" (Morrison 27). Dylan Thomas was also a successor of Yeats, in his own way of course.

Larkin, after Thomas, shocks us with metaphors absolutely improper as in the poem "Like the train's beat" (poem "XII" of *The North Ship*). In the poem, the "Polish airgirl" in a train compartment talks to her accompanying person where her "foreign talk" has "windows":

> …gestures like these the English oaks
>
> Flash past the *windows* of her foreign talk.
>
> (*CP* 288, emphasis added)

Another Dylan Thomas heritage traceable in Larkin is the use of a surrealistic technique of association (Timms 23). In Thomas' poem "In the Beginning" "life" rises and spouts from the "rolling seas." This fact brings to his mind the picture of a gusher. He imagines that the oil gushing from it will "drive the grass":

> Life rose and spouted from the rolling seas,
>
> Burst in the roots, pumped from the earth and rock
>
> The secret oils that drive the grass. (*CP* 22)

The inappropriateness of a metaphor mentioned earlier can be noticed here also. Instead of driving the grass, oil rather undoes it. The same sort of inappropriateness can be traced in Larkin's poem "If grief could burn out" (poem "XVIII" of *The North Ship*):

> If grief could burn out
>
> Like a sunken coal,
>
> The heart would rest quiet,
>
> The unrent soul
>
> Be still as a veil; (*CP* 298)

In this poem, one is forced to make an association between "unrent" and "soul" even though it is a forced one. Then in the next line, we are further forced to take the "veil" as "still" despite the fact that there is hardly anything still about a veil. Again, in the final stanza, one can well ask, if "grief stirs," how can the "heart," the very container of feelings, lie "impotent"? The images in the poem (e.g. "the unrent soul", "still as a veil", "the stubborn flint", "the deft heart" etc.) operate, as has already been mentioned, in the manner of Thomas' surrealistic technique of association. The forlorn nocturnal feelings of the persona in Larkin's poem ("If grief could burn out") correspond to those of Thomas's "In my Craft or Sullen Art." Even the diction of Larkin betrays the influence of Thomas (e.g. "heart", "grief", "night" etc. are the common linguistic items in both the poems). A similar sort of "ineffectiveness" (Chatterjee52) of metaphor can be traced in Larkin's "Night-Music" (poem "XI" of *The North Ship*):

> … lanterns shine

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Under a still veil

Of falling streams; (*CP* 300)

Larkin's "Wedding-Wind" betrays influence of Dylan Thomas both in its technique and mood. The "stop-start syntax" (Swarbrick 44) employed in the poem is after Thomas:

And my wedding-night was the night of the high wind,

And a stable door was banging, again and again,

That he must go and shut it, leaving me

(*CP* 11; emphasis added)

The poem portrays the exuberance of a farmer's wife on the day after her wedding. The bride associates the wind blowing all through her wedding day and night with her own happiness. The wind bodies forth her euphoric enjoyment and ultimately becomes the outward manifestation of her inner joy so much so that she wonders whether death can dry up her lakes of new delight:

Can it be borne, this bodying-forth by wind

Of joy my actions turn on, like a thread

Carrying beads? Shall I be let to sleep

Now this perpetual morning shares my bed?

Can even death dry up

These new delighted lakes … (*CP* 11)

Larkin seems to have derived this ecstatic mood of the poem from Dylan Thomas. Apart from that, the musical quality of the poem is also after Thomas.

Surrealist images abound in Larkin's "Oils," the section I of "Two Portraits of Sex":

Sun. Tree. Beginning. God in a thicket. Crown.

Never-abdicated constellation. Blood.

Barn-clutch of life. Trigger of the future.

Magic weed the doctor shakes in the dance.

Many rains and many rivers, making one river.

Password. Installation. Root of tongues. (*CP* 36)

A touch of Thomas can also be traced in Larkin's "Plymouth": "A box of teak, a box of sandalwood," or "…rivers of Eden, rivers of blood" (*CP* 307). Dylan Thomas interested Larkin in juggling with sounds.

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Apart from Yeats, the musical quality of Larkin's *The North Ship* owes to John Keats as well. In fact, the poems of this volume seize the "worst of Victorianism from the worst of Romanticism" (Kuby 24). Keats is detectable in *The Whitsun Weddings* poem "An Arundel Tomb" also. The immediate issue of the poem is the monument of the Earl of Arundel and his wife, lying side by side, in their grave in Chichester Cathedral that Larkin paid a visit to at the end of 1955:

> Side by side, their faces blurred,
>
> The earl and countess lie in stone… (*CP* 110)

The very beginning of the poem calls up Keats's 'bold lover' and his lady in "Ode on a Grecian Urn." In Larkin's poem the man and his wife are seen as if holding hands ("His hand withdrawn, holding her hand") (*CP* 110) and the rest of the poem argues that what was carved by the stonemason as no more than a simple souvenir of their nuptial status (to please their friends and acquaintances probably) has been deemed by present generation as a potent symbol of eternal love. The Larkin-persona "sees, with a sharp tender shock,/His hand withdrawn, holding her hand" (*CP* 110) and starts contemplating on the couple's relationship in particular and life in general as does the Keats-persona, observing the etchings on the urn. Larkin's use of the word 'still' ("It meets his left-hand gauntlet, *still*/Clasped empty in the other…) (*CP* 110; emphasis added) alludes to that of Keats:

> Thou *still* unravish'd bride of quietness… (emphasis added)

By the end of the poem the persona comes to the conclusion that "Time has transfigured them into /*Untruth*" (*CP* 111; emphasis added). Larkin's 'untruth' comes, as if, in reply to Keats's 'truth' at the end of his ode. In fact 'untruth' here is a "negative that penetrates and stains all associations of the word 'true'"(King 26).The earl and the countess "*lie* in stone" (in the first stanza) and "*lie* so long" (in the third stanza) (*CP* 110; emphasis added). We should not fail to notice the possible pun in the word 'lie.' "The stone fidelity" that the couple "hardly meant has come to be/Their final blazon" accidentally and is out to prove "Our almost-instinct almost true" (*CP* 111). Larkin's "almost-instinct almost true" seems to respond negatively to Keats's "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" since 'almost' logically means 'not.' Same is the case with 'hardly.' The joined hands of the couple "do not represent the triumph of love over time, but our delusory wish that it might be so"(Swarbrick 113). In Keats's ode the urn testifies to the undying value of art. In his poem Larkin doubts this 'value,' calls it a distortion of truth, and thereby debunks the inherent romanticism. Larkin's "An Arundel Tomb" thus appears to be an ironic rejoinder to Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn." But, at the same time, it should be admitted that a sense of romance is ultimately preserved in the phenomenal last line of the poem. The 'us' in this line includes we readers as well. Indeed, anybody can include *herself* and utter (no matter whatever happens):

> What will survive of us is *love*. (*CP* 111; emphasis added)

Larkin's "The bottle is drunk out by one" (poem "XVI" of *The North Ship*) shows the influence of Coleridge in its use of the popular Romantic motif of the underground river. Larkin's "soundless river pouring from the cave/Is neither strong, nor deep" (*CP* 277) runs Coleridge close in "Kubla Khan": "sacred river" that "ran/through caverns measureless to man"(297). Wordsworth was another Romantic who stirred Larkin much. Larkin himself admits that once he was almost blinded by tears hearing a chance broadcast of the "Immortality Ode" on the

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car radio while driving at full throttle so much so that, "Wordsworth was nearly the price of me once" (Larkin, *Required* 53). In an interview with Miriam Gross, while commenting on poetic inspiration, Larkin amusingly said, "Deprivation is for me what daffodils were for Wordsworth" (*Required* 47). Larkin's employment of common language and colloquialism was under the influence of Wordsworth who recommended in the "Preface to the Lyrical Ballads" that the language of poetry should be, "as far as is possible, a selection of the language really spoken by men" (170). According to David Lodge, use of such "low" diction and "conscious cliché" like "I lie/Where Mr Bleaney lay, and stub my fags/ On the same saucer-souvenir, and try/ Stuffing my ears with cotton-wool…" (*CP* 102) or "When I see a couple of kids/And guess he's fucking her and she's/ Taking pills or wearing a diaphragm,/I know this is paradise" (*CP* 165) bears witness to Larkin's most conspicuous link with Wordsworth (Skinner 82). Geoffrey Harvey traces that Philip Larkin and his mentors Thomas Hardy and John Betjeman are in a "direct line of development from Wordsworth" (12). The title of Larkin's "Best Society" refers to Wordsworth's lines in The Prelude, Book II:

> …life, and change, and beauty, solitude
>
> More active even than 'best society' (28)

Larkin's "Nursery Tale" (1943-4)("The horseman, the moonlit hedges,/The hoofbeats shut suddenly in the yard,/The hand finding the door unbarred…") (*CP* 289) reveals the influence of Walter de la Mare on him. Larkin's contemporary world lacks certitude in all domains. In "The moon is full tonight"(poem "III" of *The North Ship*) Larkin cries for this lost 'certitude': "All quietness and certitude of worth . . . /For they are gone from earth."(*CP* 274)The germ of Larkin's lament for the 'certitude' can well be traced in Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach", where the latter complains about the world having "neither joy, nor love, nor light, /Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain"(211-2). Larkin derives even the very first line of the poem ("The moon is full tonight") (*CP* 274) by compressing (Morrison18) Arnold's first two lines :"The sea is calm tonight./The tide is full, the moon lies fair"(210).

Larkin's fixation with boredom owes to Johnson who held that in our lives "much is to be endured and little to be enjoyed"(33). Thus the persona in Larkin's "Dockery and Son" finds:

> Life is first boredom, then fear.
>
> Whether or not we use it, it goes,
>
> And leaves what something hidden from us chose,
>
> And age, and then the only end of age. (*CP* 153)

Rajamouly opines that Larkin's obsession with death (manifested in several poems like "Ambulances," "The Building," "Going," "Next, Please," "Days" etc.) has its root in Johnson. The "fragility of human choice" and the "universality of human misery" (27) are also Johnsonian in nature. This accounts for the persona's acceptance of failure in Larkin's "Mr Bleaney." Nostalgia for the past is also "similar to Johnson" (27). Thus the persona in Larkin's "Homage to a Government" cries for a lost "English" glory:

> Next year we shall be living in a country

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That brought its soldiers home for lack of money.

The statues will be standing in the same

Tree-muffled squares, and look nearly the same.

Our children will not know it's a different country.

All we can hope to leave them now is money. (*CP* 171)

His "MCMXIV" becomes a dirge on the good old Edwardian England that the World War-I terminates:

Never such innocence,

Never before or since,

As changed itself to past

Without a word – the men

Leaving the gardens tidy,

The thousands of marriages

Lasting a little while longer:

Never such innocence again. (*CP* 127-8)

And the persona (in "Going, Going") laments the loss of the pristine pure rural English landscape:

And that will be England gone,

The shadows, the meadows, the lanes,

The guildhalls, the carved choirs.

There'll be books; it will linger on

In galleries; but all that remains

For us will be concrete and tyres. (*CP* 190)

Blake Morrison locates a striking similarity between William Empson's "Let it Go" and Larkin's "Ignorance" since a "strangeness of things"(103) is examined in both the poems.

In Larkin's poem we find it is "Strange to know nothing, never to be sure/Of what is true or right or real" (*CP* 107). The same awkwardness and hesitancy are expressed by Empson as well: "It is this deep blankness is the real thing strange./The more things happen to you the more you can't/Tell or remember even what they were" (ll.1-3).

D. H. Lawrence had an immense influence on Larkin. In his own words, "…I fully agree about the importance of Lawrence. To me, Lawrence is what Shakespeare was to Keats…" (Larkin, *Letters* 34-5). In fact, his father's library provided young Larkin access to Aldous Huxley,

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Katherine Mansfield and D.H. Lawrence. Larkin wrote to J.B. Sutton in October 1944: "I continue reading D. H. L.'s letters with great admiration and delight, also Yeats' poems. They are my two constants at the moment" (*Letters* 93). Larkin owed his skepticism, cynicism and pessimism (Rajamouly 26) to Lawrence. A handful of Larkin poems offer us a picture of secular, social rituals of English community life. In these poems we get what may be called the idea of tradition or, to use Larkin's own words, the "customs and establishments" of England (qtd. in Ingelbien 217). This penchant for human festivity and social ritual is Lawrencean in nature. Larkin's "The Whitsun Weddings" presents the English social ritual of honeymoon by newly married couples. The poem is about the persona's train journey from Hull, a northern provincial city to London on a Whitsuntide Saturday and his observation of the newly married couples boarding the train at different stations on the way. We are also presented with the sights and smells of English urban and rural landscapes captured, as if, in a series of snapshots taken from the carriage window. "The Whitsun Weddings" is a poem of social and cultural attitudes. As a social poem, it presents the English social ritual of honeymoon by newly married couples. The "just-marrieds are seen with relentless romanticism, in all their exotic trappings of their class background" (Bayley 12). The poem ends with the imagery of the arrow-shower: "A sense of falling, like an arrow-shower/Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain" (*CP* 116). Rain symbolizes fertility and regeneration. The couples will be spread over London and will fall on various new grounds of life the way rain drops fall on wheat fields. The colourful carnival of "The Whitsun Weddings" is analogous to that of festive events in Lawrence's "Wedding at the Marsh" in *The Rainbow*. "Show Saturday" thrives more than any other poem in the Larkin oeuvre on English communal experience. The poem celebrates a yearly country carnival characterized by an assembled 'show' to the crowds of people for their visual entertainment and enjoyment. The 'show' incorporates a variety of people in a variety of activities. "To the Sea" is another such poem that shows the continuity of the spectacular sea-bathing tradition of the English. The poem re-creates the realistic picture of happy seaside family vacation: "The miniature gaiety of seasides" which is "half an annual pleasure, half a rite" (*CP* 173). In his "Wedding-Wind" Larkin impersonates another character. The poem records the feelings of a farmer's wife on the day of her wedding. This technique of writing as another character is under the influence of the novelist Lawrence. It is worth mentioning that in 1946 Larkin regarded himself primarily as a novelist (Swarbrick 44).

Larkin's scattered remarks on foreign poetry and poets show his utter dislike of them: "*Hautes Fenêtres*, my God! A writer can only have one language …" (*Required* 69; emphasis original); "…deep down I think foreign languages *irrelevant*" (*Required* 69; emphasis added); "Who's Jorge Luis Borges?" (*Required* 60); "I hate being abroad" (*Required* 55) etc. But despite the fact that Larkin's work shows little interest in the "civilisation of other ages and other countries" (qtd. in Day 86), it is possible to trace even some 'symbolist' elements in some of his early poems. Andrew Motion convincingly shows that Larkin's "Femmes Damnées"(written in 1943 though not published until 1978) strongly echoes Baudelaire's poem of the same title. In Larkin's own words: "evidence that I once read at least one 'foreign poem'" (Motion 73). Larkin wrote the poem under the name of Brunette Coleman, a character he invented when at Oxford. His "Sympathy in White Major" alludes directly to a Gautier poem (Skinner 83). Larkin's own comment on his poem "Absences" (1950) is worth quoting here: "I fancy it sounds like a different, better poet than myself. The last line sounds like a slightly unconvincing translation from a French symbolist. I wish I could write like this more often" (Engle 202). The lines referred to are:

> Above the sea, the yet more shoreless day,

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Riddled by wind, trails lit-up galleries:

They shift to giant ribbing, sift away.

Such attics cleared of me! Such absences! (*CP* 49)

Because of similar 'symbolist' treatment, "Friday Night in the Royal Station Hotel" ("Light spreads darkly downwards from the high/Clusters of lights over empty chairs/That face each other, coloured differently./Through open doors, the dining-room declares/A larger loneliness of knives and glass/And silence laid like a carpet…") (*CP*163) has been christened by Lerner 'Larkin's "Prelude"' (49) after T.S. Eliot's "Preludes" ("The winter evening settles down/With smell of steak in passageways./Six o'clock./The burnt-out ends of smoky days./And now a gusty shower wraps/The grimy scraps…") (*Poems* 22). It is also possible to trace some characteristics in the oeuvre of Larkin that he shares with the 'modernist' writers he claims to dislike. In spite of his avowed anti-Modernist stand Larkin got influenced by the Modernists. Larkin got "a number of craft strategies", asserts Andrew Motion, from the "Modernists in general" (12). Such things like 'typographical variation', the 'fact that rhymes are sometimes seen rather than heard', and the 'visual organization of line-ending and stanza-arrangement' are, in view of Simon Petch (8), some of the traits that Larkin shares with the modernists. The use of polyphonic voices in poems like "Vers de Société", "Posterity" etc. is also modernist in spirit. Larkin's preoccupation with time as shown by the clock is manifested in his "The bottle is drunk out by one":

The bottle is drunk out by one;

At two, the book is shut;

At three, the lovers lie apart,

Love and its commerce done;

And now the luminous watch-hands

Show after four o'clock (*CP* 277)

This obsession with time and clock showing time are Eliotian in nature. In his "Rhapsody on a Windy Night", for example, Eliot employs similar tactics:

Twelve o'clock.

Along the reaches of the street

Held in a lunar synthesis,

. . .

Half-past one,

The street lamp sputtered ,

The street lamp muttered,

. . .

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Half-past two,

The street lamp said,

. . .

Half-past three,

The lamp sputtered,

The lamp muttered in the dark.

. . .

Four o'clock

Here is the number on the door. (*Poems* 24- 6)

In both the poems, the personae suffer from insomnia and long for sleep.

Lucas takes Larkin's fatalistic stand about lives as evidenced in say, "Afternoons" , or "Love Songs in Age" as 'Eliotic' (201). Even, revealingly enough, Larkin the 'little Englander' (Skinner 83) may in fact be caught quoting lines in the original German: "Was ich besitze, she'ich im Weiten,/Und was verschwand, wird mir zu Wirklichkeiten" (*Required* 147). But one thing should be admitted that whatever 'foreign'/'symbolist' /'modernist' elements are there in Larkin, they are 'peripheral' (Day 87) to the main body of his work.

Quite a few poets of Larkin's admiration find their way into his *Required Writing* – Christina Rossetti, Tennyson, William Barnes, Wilfred Owen, Stevie Smith, Edward Thomas, Anthony Powell, Barbara Pym, Emily Dickinson and Sir John Betjeman. It was through reading Hardy, asserts Day (29), that he framed this kind of a choice. Among them Betjeman was, in Larkin's view, the best poet of contemporary England. Like Larkin, Betjeman also preferred emotion to intellect in writing poetry and was avowedly against 'modernism.' In his poetry, asserts Larkin, Betjeman proved that "a direct relation with the reading public could be established by anyone prepared to be moving and memorable" (*Required* 129). Betjeman's "astonishing command of detail" (*Required* 132) impressed Larkin a lot. Thus in his "Show Saturday" we get a "cataloguing of dailiness" (Lucas 201):

Broad beans (one split open), dark shining-leafed cabbages –

rows

Of single supreme versions, followed (on laced

Paper mats) by dairy and kitchen; four brown eggs, four white

eggs,

Four plain scones, four dropped scones, pure excellences that

Enclose

A recession of skills. (*CP* 199-200)

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It was under Betjeman's influence that we get the particulars of precise location and specific time in poems like "Here", "The Whitsun Weddings", "Church Going" etc. Larkin had been able to build up a rapport with the common reader under the combined influence of Hardy and Betjeman. Larkin's essential concern about the contemporary British life is also after Betjeman. The cyclist-persona of Larkin's "Church Going" recalls that of Betjeman's in "New Bats" (in *Old Belfries and Selected Poems*). In his *The Movement* Blake Morrison comprehensively shows that for his "Church Going" Larkin owes to Thomas Hardy, Robert Graves, John Betjeman, Norman Cameron, W. H. Auden and Robert Frost. In Hardy's "Afternoon Service at Mellstock," the child "watched the elms…watched the rooks,/The clouds upon the breeze"(403) and remained "mindless" while the church service was going on like that of the Larkin-persona who was also "uninformed" and "bored." But finally the Hardy-persona affirms the importance of the experience ("…I have gained by subtle thought on things/ Since we stood psalming there.") (403) like that of the Larkin-persona. In Robert Graves's "The Boy in Church" also the child initially "hardly hear(s) the tuneful babble,/Not knowing nor much caring whether /The text is praise or exhortation /Prayer or thanksgiving or damnation,"(ll.3-6) but finally appreciates the strength which the church offers ("…I like this church/The pews are staid, they never shiver/They never bend or sway or lurch") (ll.14-6). The persona in Betjeman's "Sunday Afternoon Service in St. Enodoc Church, Cornwall" too prefers the beauty of the sea to the preaching of the father. But at the end he "…knew your worth/Who raised you up to make this House of God" (134). The persona in Betjeman's "Diary of a Church Mouse" also "…thinks there is no God/And yet he comes…it's rather odd" (246) like that of the Larkin persona to whom the church was not "worth stopping for./Yet stop I did" (*CP* 97). Morrison is of the view (232) that for the agnosticism and the image of a disused building of "Church Going" Larkin is indebted to Norman Cameron's poem "The Disused Temple" where also the persona finally admits: "But still it overhangs our whole remembrance,/Making us both inquisitive and afraid"(44).The "younger" of the "two English cyclists" in Auden's poem "Not in Baedeker" mounts a "rotting/Rickety gallery for a lectern" and in order to "amuse" his pal "gave an imitation/Of a clergyman with a cleft palate" (423). The persona in Larkin's "Church Going" also performs a similar sort of caricature: "Mounting the lectern," the "bored" and "uninformed" persona (also a cyclist) peruses "a few/Hectoring large-scale verses" and pronounces the expression "here endeth" so loudly that the "echoes snigger" (*CP* 97). Larkin's "serious house" ("A serious house on serious earth it is,/In whose blent air all our compulsions meet") (*CP* 98) recalls Frost's "house in earnest" in his "Directive": "This was no playhouse but a house in earnest./Your destination and your destiny's" (521).

After the 'Yeatsian addiction' in *The North Ship*, Larkin appears to be crying for a new direction: " I have absorbed (I think) the literature of my early days – Auden, Isherwood & Lawrence. I still read them occasionally, but on the whole I think that only the husks remain for me – the rest I sucked in like Arthur Askey drinking whiskey. *For something new must be found* " (in a letter to J.B. Sutton on 6 July 1943) (59; emphasis added). It was in Hardy Larkin ultimately found his characteristic and unique voice. As if to counter 'Celtic' Yeats, Larkin veered to 'English' Hardy. According to Larkin, Hardy's *Collected Poems* was the "best body of poetic work this century so far has to show" (qtd. in Lerner 42). "Waiting for breakfast"(1947), which was added as a coda in the reprint of *The North Ship* in 1966, showed that Larkin's "Celtic fever abated and the patient sleeping soundly" (*Required* 30). What Larkin got from Hardy was not a "technique", rather an "attitude" (Swarbrick 34). Hardy taught Larkin to "feel." Hardy's dictum, "the poet takes note of nothing that he cannot *feel*" (*Required* 67; emphasis added) became his guiding principle. Hardy's fidelity to facts impressed Larkin and it was Hardy who taught Larkin to speak of the lived experience of day-to-day life, of real time

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and real place (Hassan 22) discarding his earlier romantic style of *The North Ship*. Thus, poetry to Larkin became, "an affair of sanity, of seeing things as they are" (Motion 12). According to Lucas, the 'discreet visionariness' of Larkin is 'Hardy-like'(201). It was Hardy's attitude to suffering that attained Larkin's admiration. Hardy had been able to write love poetry (*Poems of 1912-13*, subtitled *Veteris Vestigia Flammae*) for his first wife (Emma Lavinia) only after her death. Larkin started treading Hardy's path after getting the news of Faber rejecting his *In the Grip of Light* on 3 February 1948 and his father's death on 26 March 1948. In his "Waiting for breakfast" (mentioned earlier) the Larkin-persona seems to say that we can properly feel love towards someone only when he or she has left us. Larkin's lines: "Turning, I kissed her,/Easily for sheer joy tipping the balance to love" (*CP* 20) are similar to those of Hardy in his "At the Word 'Farewell'": "Even then the scale might have been turned /Against love by a feather, /–But crimson one cheek of hers burned/When we came in together" (406). This is Hardy at work. Thus the confession of Larkin: "When I came to Hardy it was with the 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 is perhaps what I felt Yeats was trying to make me do" (*Required* 175). As a result, he turned away from 'romantic' Yeats to 'mundane' Hardy. It was under Hardy's influence that Larkin recognized the language of prose. Thus "An April Sunday brings the snow"(1948), the first poem written after the death of his father and an elegy in his memory, is devoid of any oratory or ornate language:

> An April Sunday brings the snow
>
> Making the blossom on the plum trees green,
>
> Not white. An hour or two, and it will go.
>
> Strange that I spend that hour moving between
>
> Cupboard and cupboard, shifting the store
>
> Of jam you made of fruit from these same trees:
>
> Five loads – a hundred pounds or more –
>
> More than enough for all next summer's teas,
>
> Which now you will not sit and eat.
>
> Behind the glass, under the cellophane,
>
> Remains your final summer – sweet
>
> And meaningless, and not to come again. (*CP* 21)

The Larkin-persona's essential concern in sharing the human sufferings as expressed in his "Deception" ("Even so distant, I can taste the grief") (*CP* 32) is under the influence of Hardy. It was also from Hardy that Larkin learnt to watch the life around him as a passive outsider , as the persona in "The Whitsun Weddings" does for the first forty seven lines. Hardy's influence on Larkin was profound and permanent but the unique of Larkin lies in the fact that

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he had been able to construct an "idiom in which the influences of both Yeats and Hardy are integrated" (Swarbrick 35). In fact, the whole career of Larkin could be seen as the "often unresolved conflict between a romantic, aspiring Larkin and the empirical, ironic Larkin…"(Swarbrick 19).

Thus, despite Larkin's disavowal of literary influence (in terms of "tradition" or "the common myth kitty," for example, as we have already seen), quite a few names behind him have been detected. As a poet, all these names are grist to Larkin's mill, but at the same time it should be kept in mind that whatever 'tradition' there might have been behind his work, it is "felt in the blood rather than held up as a banner" (qtd. in Morrison 236). This essay is a humble attempt to scan the 'blood' to track down the trajectory of Philip Larkin in his way to find out his true métier as a poet.

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