

*The Early Philip Larkin  
and the Apocalyptic Spectacle*

*Prof. Dr. Jinan Al-Hajaj*

*University of Basrah - College of Education for Human Sciences*

**Abstract:**

Some of Philip Larkin's early verse is marked by an inclination towards the abstruse and the complex, which the later Larkin vehemently rejected in favour of the simple and the common. Likewise, religious and semi-biblical references find their way to his early poems as the young poet was endeavouring to flesh out his poetical themes. The current study investigates Larkin's interest in the apocalyptic, not in the fashion of the Apocalypse Poets of the late 1930 and early 1940s. In a broader sense, the apocalyptic in the current study is a symbolic or surreal event that may have a biblical dimension, conjured up to advance secular arguments relevant to the futility of existence, precariousness of the world, defeatism of human pursuits and the inevitable final downfall. It is hence more affiliated to Apocalyptic Literature without officially going under that label. The study examines poems from *Juvenila* and *The North Ship* to expose that the apocalyptic spectacles dating in the early verse were not mere accidents, but carefully contemplated motifs and well-designed symbolic mappings.

**Key Words:** apocalyptic, colossal, panorama, morbidity, annihilation, menace, death, modern poetry, existence, war.

## في وقت مبكر فليب لاركن والنظرية المروع

الاستاذ الدكتور

جنان فضل الحجاج

جامعة البصرة / كلية التربية للعلوم الانسانية

### المخلص:-

تميزت محاولات فيليب لاركن الشعرية الأولى بالغموض و التعقيد على عكس قصائده اللاحقة التي ركزت على ما هو بسيط و مألوف من الموضوعات. يعكس وجود الرؤى المستوحاة بشكل أو آخر من أسفار الكتاب المقدس في قصائد تلك المرحلة ميل الشاعر الشاب آنذاك إلى اغناء ثيماته الشعرية بالرموز و الإشارات ذات الطابع التنبؤي. لهذا تبحث هذه الدراسة في اهتمام لاركن في صياغة مشاهد تنبؤية و لكن ليس على شاكلة شعراء الابوكاليس الذين ظهوروا في نهاية الثلاثينيات و بداية الأربعينيات من القرن الماضي. انما بمفهوم أكثر عمومية، استعار لاركن الحدث الرمزي او السريالي الذي قد يمتاز ببعده الديني المتضمن الإشارة إلى الكتاب المقدس من اجل مناقشة موضوعات دنيوية ذات صلة بعدم جدوى الوجود، انعدام استقرار العالم، و فشل مساعي الإنسان و سقوطه النهائي الذي لا مفر منه. تركز الدراسة الحالية على قصائد لاركن في بداياته الأولى و ديوانه الشعري الأول *سفينية الشمال* المنشور في ١٩٤٥ لإثبات أن وجود الرؤى الشبه الدينية في بدايات لاركن الشعرية لم يكن مصادفة و إنما عنصر شعري صاغه و وظفه الشاعر بإمعان و تأمل ليخدم اغراضاً رمزية.

### **Introduction**

Between 1939 and 1945, the young Philip Larkin wrote very fluently and prolifically on various themes using a variety of forms. The entire body of the early verse, which is basically experimental and imitative, gives access to the psychological and spiritual, not to mention intellectual, forces in motion at the time and which anticipated the later development. In his early attempts, Larkin aspired to write poetry that would live up to the celebrated legacies of the poetical icons he diligently imitated: Yeats, Auden and Eliot. The apocalyptic or the colossal event features very saliently in the modern poetry with its investment in mythology, whether secular or religious. Therefore, it is not unusual that the young Larkin whose early poetry was basically a pastiche of Yeats, Eliot and Auden would be enticed to design apocalyptic scenes in his poems.

Larkin's poetry before *The Less Deceived* (1955), engaged in discussing existential and philosophical questions which are occasionally triggered by some seismic event. Such exercise runs through the early unpublished verse, featuring strongly as a major theme which the poem in its entirety pivots on or a subsidiary motif that aids to validate and bolster the poem's major themes. Colossal events and hyperbolic scenarios are woven meticulously and their narrators seem to petition against a potential or already underway spiritual and moral collapse. Existence is constantly threatened or brought to ruin in many of these poems, which may typify the poet's inadvertent response to the second World War. This apocalyptic interest neither lasted long nor produced any creditable poems though it survived to influence some poems in the Yeatsian *North Ship*.

In his later poetry, Larkin continues to grapple with themes of even more intellectual and philosophical calibre ('Aubade' or 'The Building', for instance), but opts for simple mediums, mitigated surrealistic atmospheres and less hectic drama.

### **The Apocalyptic Vision in Literature**

Apocalypse belongs to the biblical tradition and basically invests in the notion of fall and redemption, ruin and salvation, demise and resurrection within a purely religious framework. As a biblical narrative, it:

involves the end of the world, yet not simply an end but rather a finale, a consummation and—not to be forgotten—a fulfillment. Not just death and destruction, but salvation and everlasting life belong essentially to the concept and imagination of apocalypse that originally grow out of the prophetic books of the Old Testament. (Franke, 2009: 8)

'Apocalypse' as a term is 'derived from the Greek word apokalupsis (Rev. 1:1), meaning to "reveal" or "uncover" something that has been hidden'. It describes 'prophesies of the end times, whether biblical, apocryphal, or secular' (Carter, 2007: 3). Apocalypticism, Jon Paulien (2001: 7) explains, advances a world view that centres 'on the belief that the present world order is evil and oppressive' and hence it has to be destroyed and brought to an end in order to be 'replaced with a new and perfect order corresponding to Eden.'

As a literary genre, apocalyptic literature remains faithful to the same biblical principles though secularism has touched it partially or even wholly. As such, Taylor and Howard (2016:27) argue that

‘non-biblical apocalyptic writings have much in common with their biblical counterparts in terms of interests, concerns, style, themes, and purpose.’ Apocalyptic literature in this sense is not to be confused with the Apocalypse poetry movement which Henry Treece (1912–1966) and J. F. Hendry (1912–1986) founded in 1938 (Beauchesne, 2016). Rather, it draws on The Scriptures in which ‘various ancient works, including the one found at the conclusion of the *New Testament* canon, describe themselves as apocalypses’ (Taylor and Howard, 2016:31). However, visionary elements in literature are not strictly biblical, but date from pre-biblical times. In this regard, Franke (2009: 19) traces the apocalyptic vision to ‘classical pagan literature’. For instance, both Odysseus in Book XI of the *Odyssey* and Aeneas in Book VI of the *Aeneid* descended ‘to the underworld for revelations of their personal destinies’.

‘The word *apocalyptic*’, Taylor and Howard (2016: 28-9) explain, ‘was apparently first used in biblical studies by K. I. Nitzsch in the eighteenth century to refer to works at least vaguely similar to the book of Revelation, which identifies itself as an **apocalypse**’. However, ‘the expression *apocalyptic literature*’ is broadly used to designate ‘a type of writing that adopts to a significant degree the outlook of apocalypticism and portrays those themes through a vivid use of symbolic language.’ Its most central technique is the creation of ‘unusual and unfamiliar’ worlds which leave ‘the reader both with a sense of amazement and with a sense of disorientation.’ An apocalyptic scene has at its very centre visions and dreams which are neither clear nor even understandable. The visionary world of the apocalyptic literature is marked ‘by seemingly

impenetrable mysteries, puzzling symbolism, startling predictions, and foreboding announcements' (Taylor and Howard, 2016: 23). Such apocalyptic vision is triggered by profound speculation that leads to 'imagining possible worlds and even the possibility of no "world" at all as we now know or represent it' (Franke, 2009: 18). The use of apocalyptic elements may be extensive so that the entire piece is read apocalyptically or may be scarce and less straightforward when they are 'embedded in writings that are not otherwise apocalyptic in nature' (Taylor and Howard, 2016: 23, 28). Therefore, literary works as various and diverse as Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* and T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and many more may be read as examples of apocalypticism.

### **Juvenilia: Dramatising *The End***

Philip Larkin's early verse spells out the young poet's anxieties and fears through picturing the world around as coming to an abrupt end. According to Burnett (2012: 517), Larkin was inspired by his reading of *Ecclesiastes*, hence the apocalyptic phase which his early poetry manifests. On the verge of a complete, virtual annihilation, the young Philip Larkin creates personae that contemplate the aftermath of some undefined devastating catastrophe that strikes without prior warning to leave at its wake the world breathing its last. Occasionally, Larkin tends to implant his speakers in the middle of chaos where they have to navigate nonchalantly and imperturbably through the imminent menace with composure, a clarity of vision, and showing unflinching mettle and courage. The upcoming danger or the already befallen disaster help

liberate the narrators' thoughts and elevate and qualify them to voice existential assessments and evaluations. Presiding over the obliterated vast, the shamanistic spectators oversee the dying world and wrap up the apocalyptic episodes with insights and penetrating perceptions.

In this regard, 'The Days of thy Youth' (1939), which creates an intricate apocalyptic scenario and a virtual end, is a case in point. The title itself spills the morbid fears out and the use of 'thy' establishes explicit, but probably, ironical references to the scriptures. The poet's early preoccupation with death is coupled with and materialises in his awareness of the mutability and transience of existence. The poem unfolds its argument along three verses where Larkin varies the line length and metre so that the irregularity of the verse simulates the atmosphere of hurry and emergency of an apocalypse:

Ah, the rock is crumbling  
And our foothold slipping:  
Near the horizon there are clouds;  
The sun still shines  
But the wind, the wind is rising;  
And some have already gone before,  
Some will soon go.  
But for the second we are safe... (1-8)

With such meditations as typical of a mystic and religious oracle, the observing bystander paints a tumultuous panorama where the collective *our-we* braves the turmoil of a virtual annihilation. Larkin's foresight, even if coincidental, is impressive considering that Larkin began the poem, according to Burnett (2012: 517), in June 1939, i.e., three months before

the outbreak of the Second World War. In analogy, the poem envisages a world collapsing as it stands on the abysmal verge; the end is looming and fast approaching. The thematic use of repetition creates parallelism and magnifies the sense of urgency and danger: 'The wind, the wind', 'already gone' and 'soon go', 'but the wind' and 'but for the second', and 'veil on veil' (of the last line). The ongoing activation of the doomsday-like episode is triggered by the ing-constructions, namely, 'crumbling', 'slipping' and 'rising', which rhyme in the first verse, and 'toppling', 'standing', 'twisting', and 'watching' dispersed across the poem. Futurity is conjured up, as well, to project and deliberate on the upcoming, contemplated metamorphosis.

On the level of form, the poem is rather rugged and rough around the edges. The irregularity of form is functional, even though Larkin's later mastery over poetical form and his preference for rhymed verse are often cited meritoriously. Larkin seems to reserve the regular rhyme scheme for the first verse to captivate the reader and establish the poem's music. Then he, partially or completely, abandons it elsewhere or at best tends to substitute it by assonance, as in 'name/rains' and 'night/skies' or consonance, as in 'cord/regard' to ensure freer leash to passions and rhapsodies. These structural renditions serve to inflate the grievous and perilous nature of the described event. Nonetheless, the environment is, oddly enough, soon promising for 'the sun still shines' and the speaker experiences a fleeting moment of security, which runs in antithesis against the colossal event the poem sets in motion at its very onset. The reader is compromised, if not betrayed, as the alleged seismic



spectacle is almost mythologised and the know-all narrator spares a brief moment to philosophize on existence which is doomed to regression. Hence, with ‘But for the second we are safe’, the readers who anticipate an escalation of the menace are left desolate and their curiosity, piqued, abruptly declines and subsides. This shift from chaos to quiet cements the apocalyptic ambience where death prepares salvation. The safety, casually and temporarily sketched, is short-lived as expected and soon to give way to dubiousness for ‘there can be nothing durable’, and nothing survives other than ‘a name / Chipped upon a stone, washed by November rains’ (12-13).

It is a one-way existential, nihilistic trajectory, which surges downwards to the inevitable destination. Death, then, packs things up and irrevocably seals the bargain. At the inadvertent mention of death, the attitude becomes even more disconcerting and shiftless for posthumous speculations do not ignite interest. The commentator’s solitude and, in the long run, egoism and individuality are next probed as the *we* is relinquished in favour of ‘I shall be nothing more’, which epitomises and fathoms out the speaking voice’s predicament. The shift from plurality to singularity is perhaps an example of what Andrew Motion (1997:36) calls personal autonomy and acknowledges as the outcome of isolation. In his separateness as the sole sufferer, the narrator is all alone and distant, but acutely self-conscious. However, as the poem is wrapped up, the scene regains tranquillity and serenity though an arcane ambience of precariousness endures. Larkin’s persona is back from the perilous limbo he was trapped in earlier and safe again, though by no means spiritually unscathed. The entire drama turns out

to be speculatively and hypothetically unfolding in a highly disturbed mind inclined to designing apocalyptic scenarios. Standing next to his youthful companion ('Dover Beach'-like), who operates as the balance-restoring prop and the palpable link to reality, he resumes his watch of the regrettably mutable, snowy scene. Watching the snowy vista that unfolds before his eyes is a motif of awareness and discernment, but also security, non-involvement, detachment, and separation. This watchfulness symbolism often reverberates in Larkin's later poetry until it culminates in his 'High Windows'. In these first writings, the poet's perceptiveness of the challenges that both poetry and the world renew and, in consequence, his poetical stance are baffled and alienated. The voice of reason, though utterly disappointed and sneering, presides assertively and securely, unrivalled and the apocalyptic spirit is slightly curbed.

In another poem, 'I should be glad to be in at the death' (1940), the death wish resurfaces and is further pursued. The mind spins another macabre yarn, conjuring up the demise and obliteration of civilisation along with humankind as the only salvation. With a title slightly modifying the last line of Eliot's *Journey of the Magi*, in which birth and death intermingle, Larkin's poem advances its purely morbid argument (Burnett, 2012: 539). In this poem, the meditative persona carries the reflection a step further to discuss the rationales that propel such dark and sinister intimations. Imagining himself as the sole survivor of the hypothetical apocalypse, the debating commentator is tantalised by the magnetic thought of the approaching annihilation of mercenary materialism, arrogance and surefootedness that plague the world and put the narrator to

shame. He hails the end and revels in the transcendence it is going to create:

I should be glad to be in at the death  
Of our loud cities, wet hoardings,  
Faces, and trivial assertive breath –  
I should like to see the last of these things. (1-4)

The episodic sadistic philosophy keeps escalating until it culminates in ‘Then I want to lie down, and forget I’m a man’. The strands of ghastly introspections amass, entwine, and are condensed to flesh out the speaker’s misanthropy, which seems to orient and shape his morbid wishful thinking. His yearning for inertia and indolence is ensued by the summoning of an abrupt end, though, to wrap things up:

Wishing the day would come, as it must,  
When it will all go, all ploughed into line  
With fields, and the plough itself stand to rust,  
And nothing happen for a long time. (9-12)

The speaker prays for the advent of oblivion or a limbo-like state in a fashion akin to ‘Wants’ to appear later in *The Less Deceived* (1955). Life is urged to cease and stand still, perhaps indefinitely, and the narrator is, oddly enough, certain that his prayer will be answered ‘as it must’. It is a feverish prayer for the abolishment of the meretricious existence as known to the speaker and of which he has grown both weary and contemptuous. The lines quoted above offer a visionary, but camera-like, command of the world after it virtually no longer exists and things lay fallow with disuse. The plough with its

symbolism of labour, reproduction, and cultivation is to be relinquished so that all facets and phases of living are extirpated once and for all. To make the torpid scene stand out, Larkin enlists surreal details. Consequently, his poem proposes an imperative, nihilist philosophy that hails anarchy and vents sordid, mental reflections on the purposelessness of life and the merits of nonexistence. Nevertheless, the contemplating narrator does not call upon death for its own sake; he hardly wishes the world to perish because of his excessive misanthropy. It is rather his belief that the world has grown incorrigibly corrupt beyond any remedy. Superficial solutions would only aggravate the status quo and extermination is the only option left. The mood and atmosphere of the two poems examined above might appear hyperbolic, but are readily understandable in the context of the war. Larkin's reaction to the war may be tacit or even elliptical, yet also morose and wistful, as his letters from 1940 to 1945 to his friends, especially, James Sutton, demonstrate (Thwaite, 1992).

'The canal stands through the fields' (Burnett, 2012: 217-18, 560), a relatively long poem of fifty five lines composed in 1942, explores death's shadow-like presence from birth to the very end. Against the backdrop of war, the certain knowledge of death permeates and blackens the speaker's images of the canal and the fields of the first line. Everything is dipped in deadly hues: 'The sky is a bird's breast, shielding / Blue shadows in the copse', 'the burnt moon hanging', 'children lie fishing [on the other side across the river];/ Their voices scrape the silence of their hands,' and so on goes the dismal inventory. What keeps death at bay and the speculator safe is its

deferment: ‘another / Year bends in propped-up rows.’ But then, that same speaker is both awed and excited about ‘the novelty’ he finds ‘in death’: another antithetical turn that combines contraries, for death is as obsolete, timeless, and familiar as it is novel, exotic, and enticing and the speaker is both appalled and liberated by its prospects. As the observing persona felt momentary safety in ‘The Days of Thy Youth’, a similar hindsight seems to reassure the speaker in ‘The canal’ that his time is not yet up to cross to the other bank. While river and water are traditionally linked to life, rebirth and renewal, Larkin’s river, Styx-like pouring into the underworld, stands for departure and absence, an observation that calls to mind, with subtle differences, Tennyson’s sea in ‘Crossing the Bar’. The poem proceeds in a style that fluctuates between the singular address of the first person and the pluralism of *we* or between a private voice and collective consciousness. The predicament which the speaker has to face is both personal and universal. The war is obliquely present, lending appropriate images: ‘It is not reason, that those kisses / Design a bombsite, those coloured poems / Burn among papers of an enemy consulate’ (34-36). Confusion, anger, and despair are typified in the obscure poetical infusions and the mystical meditation, even though the last verse hails demystification: ‘Into lucidity / The moon is focussed’ (39-40).

Larkin’s early poems open with the eye of the observer drawn to Nature, recording and applauding its magnificence and beauty but also condemning its cruelty and mutability. This schizophrenic treatment of nature aids Larkin’s apocalyptic quests. Generally, ‘in poetry, a landscape is never only outer, it

is also a portrait of a state of soul' (Hirshfield, 1997: 12). Larkin's interest in nature, as Andrew Motion (1997: 35 ) reveals, 'is much less...for its own sake than for the opportunities it offers to moralise about the human condition'. That is, the seemingly descriptive/natural ramblings tend to meander off the accustomed course to approach and rehearse mental and psychological strains that impinged, at the time, on the consciousness of the poet. These same pressures and tensions, however, kept operating vigilantly throughout Larkin's life-long poetic career orienting and shaping his entire *oeuvre*. Against claims of parochialism and provinciality, Larkin's romantic expeditions and romantic infusions either redound to the themes or emerge as liabilities or excessive and uninformed indulgences. Steve Clark (1997:105) comments on the 'romantic tonalities in Larkin's verse', which has been over-criticised 'in an attempt to establish its range and flexibility; but this has tended to concentrate on his response to the natural world, the poignant beauty of transience, the occasional intimation of a kind of agnostic faith.' For Larkin, nature is a starting point and a balancing or ricocheting agent and, in short, indispensable.

Window imagery, commanding a rural and immobile panorama, is set into motion in 'From the window at sundown' (1940), in which reflections emerge about knowledge, futility and death. Windows are channels of knowledge from which the viewer gains an outlet into 'usual peace'. This time the window pane does not act as a barrier between the viewer and the outside real world; the window is the launching point of an exploring excursion:

From the window at sundown  
 Walking out onto grass  
 I receive intimation  
 Of the usual peace. (1-4)

The twilight is all peace and tranquillity and the holistic scene is marked by silence, respite, and motionlessness. Being concluded, the diurnal world retreats so that the nocturnal takes over. It is more like a static picture, a snapshot of natural peace and quiet. The day's work has come to an end and is laid aside until it is picked up again, presumably next morning. The world is reprieving from the hustle and bustle of the day and absorbed by a death-like hush. The dead silence creates an atmosphere of idleness and leisure; there seems to be no need to rush as everything will lie, it seems, unaltered, if it has to, for years on end. However, this silence cannot be all ascribed to nightfall. Rather, some mysterious cosmic or at least large-scale event has hit the village of the poem, therefore every activity and routine of the world has been frozen and laid aside blandly. The spectacle is the aftermath of an apocalypse. The village is struck dead, as if by a spell, and nothing moves apart from the bells whose movement shakes the otherwise dormant air:

Harvests lie  
 Resting in sheaves across  
 The arching fields.  
 Sounds fall on moss;

Are deadened; die  
 The village is there  
 As for years;  
 Its bells shake gently the air... (5-12)

However, while the external nightscape oozes inertia and lassitude, in the observer's mind, there is a mental turmoil. The outside immobility accentuates the chaos and clamour within. The awareness of the emotion/reason schism surfaces as the speaker points a finger at the former as the source of the agitation and restlessness he falls prey to:

I breathe, breathing  
 Try imagining contrast  
 Between this peace  
 And my veiled holocaust.

But emotion under  
 Guise of reason says:  
 You are the motivator; no,  
 You are this peace. (13-16)

Imagination aids the observer to realise how wide the schism stretches between the lifeless outside, which he misnames as 'peace', and his mental 'holocaust'. In the antitheses of life/death, calm/holocaust, peace/war, and reason/emotion, the conflicting and unresolved character of the argument stands out.

A similar vein runs through 'Poem' (238-39), which abounds in a dreary, sterile, and dismal imagery. The debater winds up an argument that reassesses his precarious existence and finds it irrevocably faulty and wanting. The brief iambic lines, rhyme and metre mimic the hurried and urgent tone of danger and emergency. The world has been stunted and is no longer productive or fertile. The seasonal symbolism, traditional as it is, is again a little bit twisted and tampered with when Summer's characteristic bounty, echoing Eliot's 'cruellest'



April in *The Waste Land*, is diminishing. Retrospectively, the speaker casts aspersions on his personal values, prods at them to demean and deflate them, and finds them invalid and unsound. The outcome is akin to self-blame and admission of a faulty personal logic:

Summer extravagances shrink:  
And now memories drop  
Forsakenly, I used to think,  
A finite and shapely crop,  
Nothing was more mistaken... (1-5)

The symbolic opening is soon to give room to more symbolic speculation about the world and even perhaps existence. The cosmos, in its entirety, is being remoulded over and over again. Everything lays unfinished as if time had stopped and the scene is frozen; whatever is built soon falls into ruin and disuse, hence an atmosphere of waste and loss prevails:

At the fierce unfinished centre  
Everything grows and is broken,  
Spring, summer, and winter. (6-8)

There is a fervent desire to create something that matters, but any flicker of hope soon proves illusory and is, thus, beaten out. Ascent, beguiling as it must be, is soon followed by a downward trajectory for the 'headland' of ambition is slippery and eludes the touch:

If gulls rose in the wind  
Crying, and fell away

From the climbed headland  
 One similar day  
 To this, we were lucky but  
 Can claim no credit,  
 For nothing consolate  
 Ever was granted... (9-16)

Dreariness and dissipation are further fathomed out with more retinal images of waste and forsakenness. Some of the ideas that this poem introduces, but to which it does not do great credit, reappear later in 'The View'. Both poems share the symbolic outlook from above and both map the metaphor of past years in terms of a descent. Time is appraised as cyclic and repetitive as the daily rising sun. Again, awareness and consciousness through seeing on the one hand and sunlight on the other orient and animate deducible knowledge:

And the eye must descend  
 Through the sparse field of years  
 To this empty land,  
 This desert of houses  
 Where the aristocratic  
 And to-be-denied  
 Gold sun throws back  
 Endless and cloudless pride. (17-24)

An imagery of hollowness or nothingness dominates the scene and only an 'aristocratic' sun rules unrivalled. The view from above is neither comforting nor promising; hope sinks and bounties of seasons are dwindling or even going. The barrenness which threatens the entire landscape is not a figment of a disturbed imagination. It is worth mentioning that Larkin mildly revised lines (22-24) and used them to close poem VIII from *The North Ship*.

***The North Ship: a Journey of No Return***

The apocalyptic panorama of Juvenilia persists to influence Larkin's first published volume *The North Ship* (1945). It is strongly present in the opening poem I or 'All catches alight', which looks more like a theatrical epic with wintry drums banged backstage; meanwhile spring burgeons and blooms. The spring devotee(s) seem to be far more articulate and eloquent in their verbal defence whereas the foe, none other than the bellicose winter, proves vulgar, uproarious, and incessant. While the spring conjurer hails an almost illusionary green, fruitful spring: 'All catches alight / At the spread of spring', winter's menacing drums, heralds of death and extirpation, are roaring backstage: '*A drum taps: a wintry drum.*' Here, the speaker's mind goes into denial as if by mentally visualising spring through the mere power of contemplative concentration, the phantasmagoria will assume shape and actualise and winter sabotaging spirit may be exorcised. The argument asserts the advent of the much desired season to resurrect life and tip the scales in favour of warmth and joy. Despite its superficial simplicity, the regular rhyme scheme, the dramatic refrain, and the variation of anapaestic trimeters and tetrameters, the poem discusses a philosophical strand where a far more profound theme is handled. The mind grows aware of the perils of lapsing into cold torpor, hence its feverish endeavour to ward off depredation:

Let the wheel spin out,  
Till all created things  
With shout and answering shout  
Cast off remembering;  
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.* (28-36)

This is the typical Larkin mentality which is going to take further measures in his later poetry. It is a mentality inclined towards and overwhelmed by dialectic that sounds largely aggressive and belligerent; it seems to pick a fight whenever the opportunity offers. Hence, the argument is couched in the form of warring polarities and competing, antithetical extremes. The commentator looks forward to the wheel spinning and the promised novelties attained in due course, which aid his resurrectional hypothesis. In this respect, the poem clearly draws on Yeats' 'The Second Coming' (1919) or even as late a poem as 'The Gyres' (1936/37), from which Larkin borrows 'Rejoice!' that ends his first stanza.<sup>(1)</sup> Yet, Larkin seems to reiterate the theme of resurrection slightly differently in that it is, in essence, the speaker's seemingly mundane vision that is promoted. It is the personal and private version of life that the speaker aspires to militate. Though Larkin endeavours to enlist a secular ambience, he does not dispense with Yeatsian or even scriptural vocabulary, resorting to 'rejoice', 'whirl', 'wheel', 'resurrected', 'buried men', 'beasts', and 'ghost' to advance the argument. Nor is poem's imagery entirely irrelevant to primeval fertility myths with its resort to seasonal antithesis and warring adversaries. However, the apocalyptic spirit is eclipsed so that the general ambience appears metaphorical, though barely surreal. It becomes difficult if not impossible to find a logic that reconciles the actual version of the world in which winter is a

constant menace with the ideal conjuration of spring. The seasonal renewal does not seem to supply evidence, convincing enough, of the promised rejuvenation. Therefore, no true or final denouement is offered and the argument runs a full circle to settle back into its inaugurating point, unresolved, with winter's drums roaring. The symbolic war of life against death will keep on going non-stop, at least, as far as the commenting voice is concerned.

In 'The North Ship', five poems endeavour to capture the fervent human pursuit of the unknown, the unconventional, and the risky, making it an apocalyptic experiment. Saved for last, 'The North Ship' poems embody both Larkin's unorthodox personality, his cherished interest in contrariness, and his proclivity to push things in extremis. In a letter addressed to James B. Sutton in October, 1944, Larkin enclosed a poem entitled 'Song: the Three Ships' which differs, in many respects, from the published version of 'The North Ship'. In the same letter, Larkin expresses his dissatisfaction with the 'Three Ships', rather vociferously to be accurate, hence the significant modifications later induced (Thwaite, 1992: 92-2). However, the general frameworks of the two are identical and the motif operating remains unchanged. In another letter to Sutton dated nine days later, Larkin, already proceeding with his revision of the poem starting from its very title, wrote: 'I have just been rewriting The North Ship, the ballad I sent you some days ago. It took a great hold on my imagination, and I planned some more poems to make it into a loosely-linked long poem.' His long, probable 'Ancient Mariner' seems to face an impasse as Larkin (1992: 93) proceeds to explain:

Every now and then I am impelled to try to declare a faith in complete severance from life: and I can never quite do it. Perhaps it is as well, because who knows the consequences? And I always say that no one can write well if he does not believe what he is writing... In consequence the subsequent poems, planned as analysis and celebration of this faith, have come to nothing (1992: 93).

The five-section song was accomplished ultimately, and it is heavily packed with symbolism and possesses a barely disguised mythical ring. In 'The North Ship', man is set in conflict against wild nature. Like Coleridge's 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', Longino (2003:94) argues that Larkin's poem raises the alarm 'against violating the union nature offers and the isolation and torment caused by the violation.' Cooper discusses in detail the symbolic value of journeying, which is a key motif that premiered in Larkin's early work and kept permanent appearance in his later poetry. Larkin's choice of a journey to the north, Cooper (2004: 87-9) points out, refers back to *Letters From Iceland* by Auden and MacNeice. For the latter, the journey towards Iceland is both liberating and invigorating, where Iceland is a paragon of the avant-garde and tolerance, due to its espousal of unorthodox practices and sexual orientations. The imagery of 'The North Ship' strikes the reader as unrealistic, hence the delirious dreaming ambience. As *The North Ship* makes scant references to reality, Larkin creates an imagery that goes along with 'the exploration of inwardness', resulting in obscurity (Day, 1997: 38). The surreal panorama is not a monopoly of the title poem, but a consistent

motif in the collection as a whole. The poem, in all, typifies Larkin's yearning to turn things upside down, go against the current, and re-emerge victorious.

In '*Legend*', which inaugurates the narrative, three ships set sail; the ships that went west and east come back home happily and unhappily consecutively. Their fates are sealed and hence they neither stir curiosity, nor achieve glory, nor experience shame except provisionally. Both ships do not deviate from the set course of success or failure and embody the usual, common mainstream in consequence. It is the ship that heads north, in defiance of norms and rationality, whose fate is an enigma and requires solving. Therefore, the dauntless vessel deserves to be singled out and mythologized. While the north in *Letters From Iceland* breathes liberty and tolerance and people are not weighed down by any shackling commitments and unwieldy constrictions, the north in Larkin's '*Legend*' is 'the darkening sea', yet to be explored where 'no breath of wind came forth, / And the decks shone frostily'. An image of immobility and impotence is conjured up in tandem. The journey north is one that seems to be taken by a ship whose crew are set to explore uncharted seas and are hailed by the realisation that theirs could be a no-return journey. So the crew on board of the north ship are the pioneers and the daredevils straying into no-man's-land and grappling with the corollaries of the risky adventure. Yet, they still choose to embark on this perilous expedition and continue to plough a futile, lifeless, and unforgiving 'unfruitful sea'. And later the same strain is rehearsed: 'But the third went wide and far / Into an unforgiving sea / Under a fire-spilling star' (21). The north ship is the one that 'was rigged for a long

journey', as the onset tells, though this piece of information is revealed in the last line.

What is curious about the north ship is not only that it has gone on to a destination other ships abstain from, but also the idea that this ship's journey may be both endless and non-returnable. Further, while the west and east ships seem to make unconscious choices, otherwise the latter would not have gone on its wretched journey to return unhappily, the north ship seems to make a conscious and voluntary choice, and this is why it 'was rigged for a long journey.' In an early version of the poem that survives in his letter to Sutton mentioned above, Larkin ended each stanza with this line as a refrain. With hindsight, he later confined it to the last stanza to become a characteristic of the north ship apart from the two others. Had the line become a refrain, the north ship would have been stripped of some of its glamour and uniqueness. In sum, the north ship of 'Legend' has sailed on its own will to get stuck in an ungainly fate from which there is no hope whatsoever of liberation. As such, the notion of the fall from grace is rehearsed which may or may not be followed by redemption. On it will keep going, navigating through the northern territory, an endless stretch of insatiable frosty seas, and meanwhile forging its own legend. The narrating persona argues perhaps on behalf of conscious choices, being unconventional and contrary to the norms, which send their makers fumbling into mystery and jeopardy. A mind aspiring for an apocalypse is tempted to flout conventionality and chart its own maps at very high stakes. Like the journey north, once idiosyncratic choices are made, the point of no return is crossed and retreat denied



and blocked. However, *'Legend'* seems to make the point that no withdrawal is desired let alone sought out or pleaded. The north sea will keep attracting deviants and eccentrics who find it energising, despite suffering, until it is broken and tamed. Its Sirens keep luring adventurers who are neither intimidated by the hazardous experience nor inclined to feel regret. Though *'Legend'* per se does not create a strictly apocalyptic atmosphere proper, it prepares the ground for the imminent perdition to be forged in the remaining sections.

The narrator of *'Legend'* is omnipresent, but external, relating the story in an offhand detached manner. It appears as if the fate of the ship matters less to him, being not one of the doomed crew on board. Therefore, his version lacks the personal involvement and individualistic air. In the next poem, *'Songs: 65° N'*, the situation is redressed; the point of view becomes internal and the voice is projected from within. In so doing, 'the mindscape of the narrator who happens to be a member of the crew' is pried open as his sleep is 'perturbed' by 'a "recurrent" nightmare' (Chatterjee, 2006: 49). The nightmarish atmosphere is responsible for bolstering up the annihilative panorama of the frozen deadly territory which the north ship navigates through. Composed of short brisk lines, the song simulates the singer's precarious state of mind after a long voyage into the Arctic wilderness. The singer is one of these doomed sailors who are stranded in this northward ship arriving at 65° N, a latitude where Iceland is located.<sup>(2)</sup> Oddly enough, the atmosphere that the song promotes is rather hallucinatory and morbid: 'My sleep is made cold / By a recurrent dream / Where all things seem / Sickeningly to poise / On emptiness, on

stars / Drifting under the world' (22). The crew member seems to be trapped in a limbo; he oscillates between wakefulness and sleep, where an icy, lifeless sea panorama frowns at him in the day and haunts his sleep at night. It is more like the spell of the mythological Sirens cast on the sailors to enmesh them, on end, in an entrancing reverie that would lead them to their final downfall and eventually have them all perish. However, the singer is all too aware of the traumatic experience, and laments the irrevocable bargain:

Light strikes from the ice:  
Like one who near death  
Savours the serene breath,  
I grow afraid,  
Now the bargain is made,  
That dream draws close. (13-18)

The sea-sufferer craves unconsciousness and thirsts for a blackout though he is by no means relieved by dreams. Awakening from dreams is set parallel to death, for the dream, no matter how nightmarish, seems to be less horrifying than awakening to face the appalling reality in the middle of the merciless sea. The rough climate and hostile, albatross-less sea bode ill and articulate death tolls. On a metaphorical level, imagination and dream, despite their bizarre or uncommon nature, are contrived to circumvent the frustration which reality inflicts.

In '70° N: *Fortunetelling*', the past and future are entwined as the ship bashes on the icy waters of the Arctic. The voyager is reminded that he has still the infinitely stretching sea to

navigate and a very long way to go before the expedition comes to a close, a fact he is fully aware of. In line with Eliot's *Waste Land*, though not as clairvoyant as Madame Sosostriis in 'The Burial of the Dead', the northern fortuneteller, on one level, reveals a prospective fate, promising idyllic and romantic quests that pander to the globetrotter's cherished fantasies and cravings:

'You will go on a long journey,  
In a strange bed take rest,  
And a dark girl will kiss you  
As softly as the breast  
Of an evening bird comes down  
Covering its own nest.' (1-6)

Indeed, the image of the dark girl, native of the Arctic, haunts masculine fantasies, a theme Larkin will return to treat in 'Breadfruit' (1961). Larkin is all too aware of the affiliation between the two, admitting in a letter to Robert Conquest in December 1961 that the latter is 'in direct linear succession to The North Ship' (Thwaite, 1992:335). Feminine and masculine symbolism is so cardinal in 'The North Ship', expressing 'Larkin's early mythical psychic voyage into manhood, into the "male-strom"' (Longino, 2003: 94). On another level, the future projected here could be a disguised replica of the past: "Lest memory exclaim / At her bending face, / Knowing it is the same / As one who long since died / Under a different name." Hence, the north-farer, who will always remain a stranger and expatriate, is not entirely extricated of past memories, failures, and disappointment, and is prone to get thrust back into nostalgia. If it is a journey north towards escapism, it must be

then a fiasco as the escapist finds himself re-experiencing the past he thought he left behind. Furthermore, the traveller is plagued with the knowledge that all the efforts he exerts to forgo the past and the exile he imposes on himself could be null and void. His awareness that this world does not mutate simply by navigating through distant or foreign latitudes stops him short of sliding into barren reveries. '70° N: *Fortunetelling*' is part and parcel of the sea credo, but also an indispensable component of the mental and psychological picture. Clairvoyance fits in well with the feverish desire to elude and forestall the future and even reshuffle its cards. Humans hope to adjust the future to their own dreams and wishes and ward off evil and misfortune. In all, it is the endeavour of the transcendental, visionary mind, reaching out for the supernatural to rewind and straighten the proceedings of fate even though an apocalypse is inevitable.

An Odyssey-like voyage to the unfriendly north cannot do without a perfect storm to go with it and aggravate peril and agony. '75° N: *Blizzard*' fits into the slot perfectly well. As the ship plods on north and as the voyage is drawing towards its finale, a snowy storm strikes the sea-farers: 'Suddenly clouds of snow / Begin assaulting the air' (23). Oddly enough, the crew is taken aback by the abrupt hostility of the weather, quite oblivious to the fact that they have penetrated very deep into unmanned, wild territory. The awe-struck boarders commence to theorise and visualise about the inhospitable blizzard that greets them as the ship traverses five degrees closer to the north. Their theories strike a puerile and nugatory tone considering the risk and lethality they are exposed to:

Some see a flock of swans,  
 Some a fleet of ships  
 Or a spread winding-sheet,  
 But the snow touches my lips... (5-8)

Their perception is clouded and minds are delirious with denial when portentous reality is disputed. Perhaps, they have all taken leave of their senses and grown so insane and bewitched by the eerie atmosphere of the antagonistic waters that they go ranting, raving, and spinning yarns of groundless propositions. Neither the romantic and imaginative with their swan flock hypothesis, nor the feverish with their nonsensical one, nor even the sinister with their 'spread winding-sheet' signifying impending death are credible enough to the narrating voice to admit them into the realm of possibility. Shrugging them all off, he has in store a different theory:

And beyond all doubt I know  
 A girl is standing there  
 Who will take no lovers  
 Till she winds me in her hair. (9-12)

The girl's hypothesis has made its debut in the first stanza, where the air is seen to be 'As falling, as tangled / As a girl's thick hair.' The sailor, on his part, romanticises the storm where a Calypso-like enchantress is set on entangling and detaining him. He argues in terms of sure knowledge that such a creature has singled him out, apart from other sailors, and laid her snare to trap him. She intends to bring him to his ruin, hence he is the

jinxed, ill-starred passenger, a Jonah-like persona, bringing calamitous fate to the vessel that carries him. In so doing, the narrator stresses that love and romance and the entanglement they entail are hazardous. Larkin could have in mind and hence even parody, perhaps, Shakespeare's Miranda who meets her Ferdinand after a similar ship wreckage caused by a human-induced storm. However, romance in Larkin's poem is ridiculed and reduced to hysterical gibberish.

The blizzard is designed to accelerate the flow of the narrative towards its climax. The north ship must drop anchorage, the perilous, ominous journey is drawing to an abrupt close. It has got stuck in the middle of nowhere. However, 'Above 80° N' is barely a concluding coda of 'The North Ship' in the conventional sense of the term. It begins as a fully-fledged song with the singer identified:

'A woman has ten claws,'  
 Sang the drunken boatswain;  
 Farther than Betelgeuse,  
 More brilliant than Orion  
 Or the planets Venus and Mars,  
 The star flames on the ocean;  
 'A woman has ten claws,'  
 Sang the drunken boatswain. (1-8)

The song, with its typical bawdy seamen's opening, trails away after the first line and the narrator picks up where the boatswain left. The topic of the song also shifts from a eulogy of the marvelous sea firmament to a derogatory tenor, longing for, but equally repulsing, a woman's companionship. As the ship navigates through the north, 'fear gathers into the image of the female lover' (Swarbrick, 1995: 25). Therefore, Longino

argues that 'The North Ship' is 'a tale about the terror evoked in the male by the female, the risk that the male undertakes and feels in seeking out the lost feminine, and the unreadiness of the masculine to reunite with the feminine.' Though the death-inspiring image of the woman embodies 'the sabotaging persistence of the masculine fear of the feminine', the stellar imagery that follows flames the ocean up (2003: 94). The unidentified stars of the ocean which breathe flame and fire are brighter than all of the Orion constellation, Venus and Mars together. The idea of the woman as a merciless Siren luring the helpless seafarers and ripping them up emerges again. A woman, not the sea and its perils, nor the icy, frozen latitude, is named as the tool of ruin and fall from grace. The song exposes the insanity of the entire pursuit and indeed no man would have his wits about him, when combating this hostile climate or the ten-clawed woman. The mind breaks down and reason implodes under all the psychological pressures. So, the apocalyptic subconscious designs a female figure whose appearance, monstrous and uninviting, inspires fear rather than loveliness and romance.

A drunken and awkward finale as it is, the song sums up the futility of the whole pursuit, derides the superego that has launched it in the first place, and plays down the seriousness of the entire quest. 'Above 80° N' is intended as a requiem rather than celebration of the doomed adventure. The five poems of 'The North Ship' simulate a mind's journey when it goes astray, toils, labours, and meanders into nothingness. The argument the poem puts forward leads nowhere and Larkin seems to have intended it thus, making it a modernist poem of a peculiar kind (given that it is also meant to be a ballad). His poetical ship is supposed to remain marooned in the frozen latitude, to be defrosted, if at all, in a novel not a poem. In a letter to James Sutton dated 20<sup>th</sup> September 1945, Larkin writes: 'Now I am thinking of a third book in which the

central character will pick up where Katherine [*A Girl in Winter*] left off and develop *logically* back to life again. In other words, the north ship will come back instead of being bogged up there in a glacier' (Thwaite, 1992:109-10). Ultimately, a third novel never saw the light and the north ship remains stranded.

### **Final Remarks**

Larkin implemented the apocalyptic references in his early verse to typify his views regarding the world which was falling apart under the impact of the war. But it is also a reflection of an experimental phase marked by the influence of other poets of the time. Apart from that, though far from being perfectly structured, Larkin's apocalyptic scenes carry a private and personal ring. The young Larkin was by no means free from the anxieties, fears, and psychological and mental strains of the mature and later Larkin. The morbidity, pathos, and death phobia that characterise the best part of his mature collections have their roots in juvenilia in which the world is painted in sombre and gloomy hues. Further, the apocalyptic event releases a prophetic intuition of the young poet who relies on the past and present to shape dreary visions of the future. As such, Juvenilia manifests the poet's bleak view of the future. Poem after poem seems to rehearse the idea that the world has to be destroyed and nothing should survive the annihilating event since nothing is worthy of salvation. In *The North Ship*, Larkin's poems became less concerned with the world's end and less coloured by the Ecclesiastical influences. Any religious connotations are dispensed with in favour of more secular intimations. Nevertheless, the prophetic tone persists investing in the supernatural. Clairvoyance shapes the dreams, visions and hallucinations of the poems and the subconscious and the surreal override the tangible and real.



### **Bibliography**

- 1- Drawing on 'The Gyres', Larkin seemed to have absorbed Yeats' later poems, contrary to his claim in the introduction to the Faber edition of *The North Ship* (Larkin, Philip, *Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces 1955-1982* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983), p. 29).
- 2- When googled, the position 65° N and 20° W is where Iceland is located, a matter that further bolsters Cooper's observations on the affinities *The North Ship* has with *Letters from Iceland*.

### **References**

- Beauchesne, Nicholas (2016). 'Apocalypse Poets'. *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Modernism* : Taylor and Francis. <https://www.rem.routledge.com/articles/apocalypse-poets>.
- Burnett, Archie (ed.) (2012), *The Complete Poems of Philip Larkin*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Carter, John W. (2007). *An Introduction to the Interpretation of Apocalyptic Literature*. [www.biblicaltheology.com/Research/CarterJ08.pdf](http://www.biblicaltheology.com/Research/CarterJ08.pdf)
- Chatterjee, Sisir Kumar (2006), *Philip Larkin: Poetry That Builds Bridges*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers.
- Clark, Steve (1997). 'Get Out As Early As You Can: Larkin's Sexual Politics'. In Stephen Regan (ed.). *Philip Larkin*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 94-134.
- Cooper, Stephen (2004). *Philip Larkin: Subversive Writer*. Brighton: Sussex Academic Press.
- Day, Gary (1997). "'Never Such Innocence Again": the Poetry of Philip Larkin'. In Gary Day and Brian Docherty (eds.). *British Poetry from the 1950s to the 1990s*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 33-47.
- Franke, William (2009). *Poetry and Apocalypse: Theological Disclosures of Poetic Language*. Stanford : Stanford University Press.
- Hirshfield, Jane (1997). *Nine Gates: Entering the Mind of Poetry*. New York: HarperPerennial.

- Larkin, Philip (1983). *Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces 1955-1982*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Longino, Victoria (2003). 'The Alien Moment: Philip Larkin and Gender'. **Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies (HJEAS)**, 9/2, pp. 91-104.
- Motion, Andrew (1997). 'Philip Larkin and Symbolism'. In Stephen Regan (ed.). *Philip Larkin*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, pp. 32-54.
- Paulien, Jon (2001). *The Hermeneutics of Biblical Apocalyptic*. [https://www.preteristarchive.com/Books/pdf/2001\\_paulien\\_hermeneutics-of-apocalyptic.pdf](https://www.preteristarchive.com/Books/pdf/2001_paulien_hermeneutics-of-apocalyptic.pdf).
- Swarbrick, Andrew (1995). *Out of Reach: the Poetry of Philip Larkin*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Taylor, Richard A. & David M. Howard Jr. (2016). *Interpreting Apocalyptic Literature*. Grand Rapids: Kregel.
- Thwaite, Anthony (ed.) (1992). *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin: 1940-1985*. (London: Faber and Faber.
- Waterman, Rory (2014). *Belonging and Estrangement in the Poetry of Philip Larkin*. R. S. Thomas and Charles Causely. (Farnham: Ashgate.