

'The North Ship'

The other week I wanted to say something about Art, and in the course of the matter quoted one of my favourite poets, Philip Larkin. Today, I would like to return to Larkin's poetry. At the risk of prompting contradiction from the English Department, I would rank Philip Larkin as perhaps the greatest English poet of the last 50 years. He was born in 1922 and died in 1985. For most of his life he worked as the librarian at Hull University, whilst producing poetry of incredible intensity and depth. He is not an easy poet. He had a tough sense of how difficult life can be.

His personal philosophy was pessimistic – he felt a deep sadness at what he understood to be the hopelessness of life. I recommend that you look into his poetry if there is any part of you that enjoys reading great literature.

I would like to focus upon a poem of Larkin's for this assembly. I will use an early poem of his, written for his first volume of poetry. The poem is called The North Ship. It has a simple, fable-like feel to it, but is more complex than it first appears. The opening line is "I saw three ships go sailing by", which recalls the Christmas carol "I saw three ships", but the differences are important. The first line of the carol is "I saw three ships come sailing in". The ships are sailing joyfully into Bethlehem to celebrate Christmas morning - quite an achievement, given that Bethlehem is a landlocked town, south of Jerusalem. In Larkin's poem, the ships have no home port – they are out at sea already. The carol celebrates a return, but Larkin is more interested in the journey.

I choose this poem because it is an interesting, accessible early work, which adds a sense of mystery, hope and challenge that is unusual in much of his later writing. If there is anything that I would like you to take away with you from the assembly, it is that combination of emotions – mystery, hope and challenge. Here is the poem in its entirety:

'The North Ship'

I saw three ships go sailing by,
Over the sea, the lifting sea,
And the wind rose in the morning sky,
And one was rigged for a long journey.
The first ship turned towards the west,
Over the sea, the running sea,
And by the wind was all possessed
And carried to a rich country.

The second ship turned towards the east,
Over the sea, the quaking sea,
And the wind hunted it like a beast
To anchor in captivity.

The third ship drove towards the north,

Over the sea, the darkening sea,
 But no breath of wind came forth,
 And the decks shone frostily.

The northern sky rose high and black
 Over the proud unfruitful sea,
 East and west the ships came back
 Happily or unhappily:

But the third went wide and far
 Into an unforgiving sea
 Under a fire-spilling star,
 And it was rigged for a long journey.

The three ships represent something, as do their journeys, as does the wind. But what? That is the beauty of poetry – you get out what you bring to it. You will have given your own value and significance to those images. You will have made your own sense of the poem.

Perhaps one reading is that each ship is a way of living a life. One ship is ‘possessed’ by the wind and is ‘carried to a rich country.’ That sounds like a life dominated by a drive for success and personal wealth. But the words ‘possessed’ and ‘carried’ do not suggest that the quest for wealth is a positive and willing activity – it does not imply that happiness is achievable by this route.

The second ship is ‘hunted like a beast’ by the wind. It travels over the ‘quaking sea’, until it ‘anchors in captivity.’ It sounds as though this life is even less successful – hurt by others and without freedom or authority.

But notice that both of these ships return to the place where they started from:

“East and west the ships came back
 Happily or unhappily”

For all the apparent success or failure, there has been no progression for these ships. But there is a third ship – the North Ship.

We know little of this ship. It is ‘rigged for a long journey’. We are told that it ‘drove towards the North’, although strangely, whatever was powering its progress, it could do so independently of the wind, for ‘no breath of wind came forth’. In the north, the ship encountered harsh conditions – frost and a darkening sea and sky. It had a tougher time than either of the other two ships. We don’t know what happens to the North Ship. All we have is that powerful final verse:

“But the third went wide and far
 Into an unforgiving sea
 Under a fire-spilling star,

And it was rigged for a long journey.”

I don't know about you, but I know what ship I would join. I would head straight for the North Ship – and I hope I would find you in the crew as well. Those who are attracted to the North Ship are not interested in a safe time, searching for little treasures. They are not interested in living a life full of fear. They want to go 'wide and far'. They don't mind that the sea is 'unforgiving'. They don't mind that the ship is rigged for a long journey – in fact they welcome it.

Above all - they want to know more about that fire-spilling star. And I hope you feel the same.

This poem, if you agree with the reading, is inviting, even inspiring, you to take the harder route. To ask more of yourself in search of something that will give a greater meaning to your life. The alternatives are the barren search for mere money, or being the victim of other forces. Both are ultimately sterile, because your sense of yourself and the value you give yourself is defined in terms other than yourself, and which is in the control of others.

The third ship – the North Ship – travels by itself in the direction that will challenge it, but ultimately validate it. That ship finds the wonders of the world in the frosty high spaces. That ship is on a mission. That ship never comes back – always moving forward, 'rigged for a long journey'.

But whatever ship you choose in life – and make no mistake, it is you that choose your ship, not your ship that chooses you – take along a little volume of Larkin's poetry on the voyage. It is endlessly enriching and will sustain you on the journey.

And if you can – turn towards the North and that 'fire-spilling star'.