

*Neil Roberts*

### PHILIP LARKIN AND THE IMPORTANCE OF ELSEWHERE

*The Importance of Elsewhere* is Larkin's poem about living in Ireland, where "strangeness made sense" because foreignness proved him "separate, not unworkable". The poem concludes:

Living in England has no such excuse:  
These are my customs and establishments  
It would be much more serious to refuse.  
Here no elsewhere underwrites my existence<sup>1</sup>.

His poetry of course is massively committed to "here", not "elsewhere" – his *Collected Poems* might have carried as an epigraph his remark that he did not take holidays because they symptomised an "impotent hatred of everyday life". Many of his most distinctive and strangest effects come from an acceptance of presence, and of the present, from the cultivation of a state of mind that eschews escapes into spatial or temporal elsewheres. The importance of elsewhere is the large place it occupies in the common consciousness, and it defines the distance we have to travel when reading Larkin.

Two characteristic small examples of the power that the absence of "elsewhere" gives to the poetry are *Talking in Bed* and *Home is so Sad*. In the former the "unique distance from isolation" is a threat because nothing shows why

It becomes still more difficult to find  
Words at once true and kind,  
Or not untrue and not unkind (129).

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<sup>1</sup> Ph. Larkin, *Collected Poems*, ed. Thwaite, Faber and Faber, London 1988, p. 104. All the references in the text will be to this edition.

The speaker does not take refuge in imagining other, more perfect states of intimacy. "Lying together" is the goal of desire, and the failure of the couple is unmitigated because no more desired situation "underwrites their existence". The title of *Home is so Sad* employs the emotional keyword of Larkin's poetry and – as we shall be seeing in another, more startling example – the sadness is caused by undiluted presence:

Home is so sad. It stays as it was left,  
Shaped to the comfort of the last to go  
As if to win them back. Instead, bereft  
Of anyone to please, it withers so,  
Having no heart to put aside the theft

And turn again to what it started as,  
A joyous shot at how things ought to be,  
Long fallen wide. You can see how it was:  
Look at the pictures and the cutlery.  
The music in the piano stool. That vase (119).

The deictic is always strange in literature, and Larkin's use intensifies the strangeness, especially in the last two words. The command to look at objects to be found in most houses can be accepted as a command to imagine the examples one is most familiar with, and the music in the piano stool works as a metaphor of abandonment, but "That vase" is so very particular, and yet I doubt if many readers visualise a particular vase when they read it. It is a phrase whose grammatical form is full of a sense of presence and specificity, yet the vase is actually absent and highly generalised. It works so powerfully because what it effectively signifies is presence itself, once mitigated by being experienced as a transition to something else – "A joyous shot at how things ought to be" – but now stripped of the meaning formerly bestowed by the "elsewhere" of the imagined future. (Sound is also especially important here, as I discovered when discussing the poem with a group of American students: it works only if you pronounce "vase" in the English way, to rhyme with "cars", not in the American way, to rhyme with "case"). The significance of "That vase" is made explicit in the cognate poem (also about home), *Reference Back*:

Truly, though our element is time,  
We are not suited to the long perspectives  
Open at each instant of our lives.  
They link us to our losses: worse,  
They show us what we have as it once was,  
Blindingly undiminished, just as though  
By acting differently we could have kept it so (106).

The present was once "blindingly undiminished", but that was when it was the future, an elsewhere serving to mitigate another present. It is diminished simply by becoming the present.

If there is a strangeness in the working of "That vase" in *Home is so Sad*, there is at least no mystery about the appropriateness of the word "sad" in the poem. What do we make, though, of the same word in the final stanza of *Money*?

I listen to money singing. It's like looking down  
 From long french windows at a provincial town,  
 The slums, the canal, the churches ornate and mad  
 In the evening sun. It is intensely sad (198).

Sad because it is a Blakean scene of the social injustice wrought by money, of slums affronted by insanely opulent and indifferent churches? I simply **do not believe this**, partly because it **does not cohere** with the rest of the poem, which I shall quote shortly, but mainly because "long french windows" "provincial" and "evening sun" are as important to the total connotation as the details which might seem socially significant. It strikes me as more mysterious than that. When figurative language in poetry is obscure it is usually because the ground of the comparison is unstated and hard to deduce, as in "the evening is spread out against the sky/Like a patient etherised upon a table". But Larkin's art, while far from matching the often crude empirical simplicities of his public persona, is not (*pace* Andrew Motion and current critical opinion generally) *symboliste*. "Money singing" is like "looking down etc." in respect of the fact that both are "intensely sad". The problem is knowing why this feeling should attach to either of them. We need the rest of the poem:

Quarterly, is it, money reproaches me:  
 "Why do you let lie here wastefully?  
 I am all you ever had of goods and sex.  
 You could get them still by writing a few cheques".

So I look at others, what they do with theirs:  
 They certainly don't keep it upstairs.  
 By now they've a second house and car and wife:  
 Clearly money has something to do with life

In fact, they've a lot in common, if you enquire:  
 You can't put off being young until you retire,  
 And however you bank your screw, the money you save  
 Won't in the end buy you more than a shave (198).

The poem obviously works by an abrupt shift of register. As in *High Windows* and *This be the verse* a light verse manner associated with less than the full Larkin sensibility yields to a poetic plangency that is all the more powerful for the contrast. The poem is a kind of dialogue, not just between the poet and money, but of this latter voice with the garrulous pseudo-colloquial persona of the first three stanzas. But what of money

and sadness? Money is pure potentiality; as long as you hold on to it your existence is underwritten by the elsewhere of what you have not yet spent it on. And, as the bleak meaninglessness of "a second car and house and wife" implies, the joyful shot at how things ought to be will end up diminished as ever. The provincial town (including the "french windows" from which it is viewed) owes the peculiar intensity and melancholy of its presence to being, like the domestic details in *Home is so Sad* or the hotel in *Friday Night at the Royal Station Hotel*, anachronistic and so completed. It will disappear but that is **not** the main reason for the sadness (one could not accuse Larkin of being nostalgic about the slums): rather that, like the home, its presence is unmitigated by any sense of becoming.

An essay about presence in Larkin's poetry has to say something about *Here*, not just because of the poem's theme and title, but because it is one of the finest examples of Larkin's most consummate and elaborated manner. Like *I Remember, I Remember, Dockery and Son* and *The Whitsun Weddings* the poem is based on a railway journey. This is not exploited in quite the set-piece fashion of *The Whitsun Weddings*, but it is perhaps more deeply interfused into the structure. Throughout the poem's thirty-two lines, until the last two or three, there is a tension between travelling and arrival. The first three quarters of the poem are a single sentence whose subject is the participle "Swerving" and main verb "Gathers". We seem constantly to be arriving, both geographically and grammatically, but the expectation is constantly proved premature. In the first eight-line stanza we have "swerving to solitude" but we are taken beyond this in "Gathers to the arrival of a large town". The first *Here* follows immediately: "Here domes and statues, spires and cranes cluster [...]", and we seem, as the motif of the train-journey naturally suggests, to have finally arrived in a town. And indeed the poem does dwell in the town for a stanza and a half, though in a restless fashion, moving between the "raw estates", the plateglass shopping centre and the "fishy-smelling/ Pastoral" of the port. I have never been able to understand how the "cut-price crowd" can be "residents from raw estates" miles from the shopping centre while "dwelling/[...] Within a terminate and fishy-smelling/ Pastoral of ships up streets [...]". However that may be, the word "terminate" reinforces the sense of arrival only to be belied three lines later by "out beyond its mortgaged half-built edges [...]". It is unclear whether we are still on a train, but by some mode of travel we have reached another *Here*: one where "silence stands like heat [...] leaves unnoticed thicken, / Hidden weeds flower, neglected waters quicken". But nor is this our terminus:

And past the poppies bluish neutral distance  
Ends the land suddenly beyond a beach  
Of shapes and shingle. Here is unfenced existence:  
Facing the sun, untalkative, out of reach (136-137).

One might say that the poem is constantly deferring presence. None of its brilliantly observed details has to take quite the full weight of presence like the vase in *Home is so Sad* or the provincial town in *Money*. The travelling eye rests lightly, if intensely, on what it sees. The journey is a repeated substitution of one "Here" by another, until it reaches the point at which substitution can no longer be made. Here, at the final Here, there is no longer brilliantly observed detail but a perplexing vagueness: only "shingle" has any specificity; otherwise there is the concentratedly vague "bluish neutral distance" and the almost sinisterly nonspecific "shapes". This final destination is, in the terms of our discussion, paradoxical: it is "Here", but it is also elsewhere: "out of reach". The half-line "Here is unfenced existence" could be accented to suggest that this, secretly, has been the goal of the journey all along, and look how it disappoints. A romantic quest for freedom has been rebuffed. Certainly the poem has passed through and left behind all determinate presences, and this is what it is left with. On one reading of this unmistakably symbolic scene, we are being sent back to fenced existence, to the determinate, to the full sad weight of presence; on another, perfectly compatible, the vague, inaccessible and uncommunicative end of the journey "prefigures", in Andrew Motion's words, "the inevitable emptiness of death"<sup>2</sup>.

I will conclude by referring more briefly to two more of Larkin's finest and most characteristic poems, *Mr Bleaney* and *Dockery and Son*. In *Mr Bleaney* the poverty of the circumstances that signify presence is explicit: not just "That vase" but "Flowered curtains, thin and frayed". Nevertheless, the poem exemplifies my theme because the speaker has clearly reached a point at which "no elsewhere underwrites his existence". The fear that "how we live measures our own nature" might be especially acute if we live in "one hired box", but the notion that our "natures" are determinate and measurable by our circumstance at all is unwelcome, especially if the circumstances are unchanging. "One hired box" very obviously connotes death, but so less obviously do the unchanging home of *Home is so Sad* and the anachronistic town of *Money*.

*Dockery and Son* is a more powerful poem than *Mr Bleaney*, partly because the recognition that in *Mr Bleaney* is inspired by grossly bleak circumstances is here extended to any circumstances whatever:

Where do these  
Innate assumptions come from? Not from what  
We think truest, or most want to do:  
Those warp tight-shut, like doors. They're more a style  
Our lives bring with them: habit for a while,  
Suddenly they harden into all we've got

<sup>2</sup> A. Motion, *Philip Larkin*, Methuen, London-New York 1982, p. 80.

And how we got it; looked back on, they rear  
 Like sand-clouds, thick and close, embodying  
 For Dockery a son, for me nothing,  
 Nothing with all a son's harsh patronage (153).

Seamus Heaney has attempted to leaven the dominance of the "anti-heroic, chastening, humanist voice" in Larkin by picking out a strand of "repining for a more crystalline reality" which, when it finds expression, opens up moments "which deserve to be called visionary". This strand he identifies as "a stream of light" which suggests that "Larkin also had it in him to write his own version of the *Paradiso*<sup>3</sup>. This is a welcome and valid emphasis but it leaves us with a Larkin divided between a poetry of "commentary" and "intelligence" and a "visionary" poetry that springs "from the deepest strata of Larkin's poetic self". Heaney aspires to rescue Larkin's poetry from those who would label it "a poetry of lowered sights and patently diminished expectations", but in effect he hands over the bulk of the poetry, and the most distinctive, to that definition. It is well to be told of a Larkin who could be assimilated to the Dante of the *Paradiso* or the Shakespeare of Sonnet 60; but the Larkin I have attempted to describe is also visionary, and if his vision of unmitigated presence does not console, we have plenty of other poets to do that for us.

Department of English Literature  
 University of Sheffield

Neil Roberts

#### PHILIP LARKIN I MIEJSCA, W KTÓRYCH NAS NIE MA

Nawiązując do tytułu jednego z najważniejszych wierszy w poetyckiej spuściznie współczesnego poety angielskiego Philipa Larkina, autor artykułu podejmuje temat konfliktu między obecnością, która nie spełnia naszych oczekiwań, a romantycznymi marzeniami o ucieczce do miejsc, w których nas nie ma. Wiersze Larkina to poezja obecności, mocno osadzonej w wymiarze „tu i teraz”, widać to szczególnie wyraźnie w konsekwentnym stosowaniu przedimków określonych, w bogactwie konkretnych obrazów codziennej rzeczywistości. Choć ta obecność, statyczna, nieruchoma, pozbawiona możliwości wyboru, jest źródłem charakterystycznego dla poezji Larkina smutku, poeta zdaje się wykluczać możliwość istnienia jakiegokolwiek „gdzie indziej”. Jedynym miejscem, które w wizji poety może być przeciwstawione naszej obecności, jest śmierć.

<sup>3</sup> S. Heaney, *The Government of the Tongue*, Faber, London-Boston 1988, p. 16, 22.