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ABSENCE AND PRESENCE IN THE POEMS OF PHILIP LARKIN

HARUKI Takako

I

In December, 1988, four books of poetry by Philip Larkin — *North Ship*, *The Less Deceived*, *The Whitsun Weddings*, and *High Windows* — were compiled together and published in a Japanese translation.¹⁾ Considering the published date of *High Windows*, 1974, it is a swift response to his reputation and popularity in his own country — no translation of Seamus Heaney's books has appeared yet. Larkin's innovative poetic forms and his deep concern about the human condition have gained him a high recognition in England. Yet his Englishness has been much emphasised and it is as if without being English, there were no way to appreciate his poetry except for those who interpret Larkin in a symbolical way.²⁾

The quotation of Terry Whalen from an interview of Larkin in *London Magazine* 4 (Nov. 1964) 77 is interesting. 'When Ian Hamilton proposed to him that "Church Going" reads like a "debate between a poet and persona", the poet agreed and said that it is "seeking an answer. I suppose that's the antithesis you mean. I think one has to dramatise oneself a little."³⁾ Terry Whalen, laying stress on how Larkin sought an answer, attempts to show what different tones and postures he employs from one poem to the next. He maintains that Larkin 'self-consciously reacts to the limits of his established personality, and the result is poetry which moves continually in the direction of self-criticism and altered attitudes to experience.'⁴⁾

In this essay I would rather put an emphasis on what answers

Larkin suggests by putting together clues left in his poems, as I believe there are both intuitive and gained suggestions of an answer. More specifically, this essay is an attempt to see his poems not just as a record of the modern world observed but also as a presenter of a vision of a future world and as a preserver of beauty and hope. Larkin's poetry serves as an emblem of a dying world and what will survive of it.

II

A feeling one gets from Larkin's poems as a whole is a strange sense of absence, an absence of living creatures. Once one comes to take notice of this absence and rereads the poems more carefully, the feeling grows stronger and stronger until one begins to wonder if his poems are really about English people and English society. True, numerous people are described, but they do not convey a strong sense of existence. So many of them, having been introduced, soon lose physicality and are lost to sight. Indeed, who are the most memorable people in the whole body of Larkin's poetry? First of all, the speaker, no doubt. Who is next?

Who, for instance, would feel a stronger physicality than lovers lying in bed side by side? Larkin's lines go like this:

Talking in bed ought to be easiest,
Lying together there goes back so far,
An emblem of two people being honest,

(*'Talking in Bed'* *WW*, p. 29)

An emblem! The word, surprisingly enough, disperses the substantial existence of the two and what remains is the sense of generalisation. The couple need not be this particular one but any couple in any country. Here is another example with more English elements, *'Dockery and Son'*:

'Dockery was junior to you,
Wasn't he?' said the Dean. 'His son's here now.'
Death-suited, visitant, I nod. 'And do

You keep in touch with—' Or remember how
 Black-gowned, unbreakfasted, and still half-tight
 We used to stand before that desk, to give
 'Our version' of 'these incidents last night'?
 I try the door of where I used to live:

Locked.

(*WW*, p. 37)

The Dean fades away as his voice loses its sound. The door, conversely, is given a resolute solidity by an effective use of semicolon and by keeping 'Locked' in suspension until the next stanza. This strong physical interruption of the door remains as an undertone of the entire poem. Immediately after the 'Locked' ensues 'The lawn spreads dazzlingly wide.' 'Dazzling' is a transferred epithet. To the narrator's baffled mind, the large expanse of the lawn is dazzling. 'A strong / *Unhindered* moon' (italics mine) enjambling from stanza three to four, and the simile in stanza five —

Where do these
 Innate assumptions come from? Not from what
 We think truest, or most want to do:
 Those warp tight-shut, *like doors*.

(italics mine, *WW*, p. 38)

do show the speaker's deeply affected soul. This obstinate persistence is, although an undertone, undeniably in the poem, enforcing the solitary life of the speaker and, at the same time, making the remembered image of Dockery all the ephemeral.

Much the same effect can be seen in 'Mr. Bleaney'. Mr. Bleaney, like Dockery, is most likely a deceased person. He appears in the talk of the landlady as she keeps on telling the possible new lodger about the previous tenant. It gives a strange impression to note that where dialogue, or, at least, a gesture should be, there is only a silent survey of the room. Objects, as the result of the accurate and relentless power of the description, reproduce the

total lack of communication between the two.

'This was Mr. Bleaney's room. He stayed
The whole time he was at the Bodies, till
They moved him.' Flowered curtains, thin and frayed,
Fall to within five inches of the sill,

Whose window shows a strip of building land,
Tussocky, littered. 'Mr. Bleaney took
My bit of garden properly in hand.'
Bed, upright chair, sixty-watt bulb, no hook

Behind the door, no room for books or bags—
'I'll take it.' (WW. p. 10)

Those objects,—curtains, window, bed, chair, bulb, door—are, because of their physical directness and solidness, far more telling than the added background story of Mr. Bleaney's life in the following stanza. And the realisation of the fact that objects continue to exist as they have been evokes a strong sense of Mr. Bleaney's absence and, in the last stanza, the possible absence of the new lodger.

'The Old Fools' is yet another instance of the tenuousness of the human presence, though in a slightly different way. The inevitable decline of the body and mind in old age is given a full account of: 'mouth hangs open and drools', 'sitting through days of this continuous dreaming / watching light move.' The poet is, however, more concerned about old age itself, of which he is now witnessing an embodiment :

What do they think has happened, the old fools,
To make them like this? Do they somehow suppose
It's more grown-up when your mouth hangs open and drools,
And you keep on pissing yourself, and can't remember
Who called this morning? Or that, if they only chose,
They could alter things back to when they danced all night,
Or went to their wedding, or sloped arms some September?

Or do they fancy there's really been no change,
 And they've always behaved as if they were crippled or tight,
 Or sat through days of thin continuous dreaming
 Watching light move? If they don't (and they can't), it's strange:
 Why aren't they screaming?

(*HW*, p. 19)

The discourse is centered around the old fools in the beginning, but the more persistent the questionings are, the more the focus changes its direction towards the questioner himself. There is a gradual awareness that he cannot escape the same fate, either. The fate does not exclude the reader. As the poem progresses, the speaker by degrees loses sight of the aged people. The sense of absence is not only because they 'give / An air of baffled absence' (*HW*, p. 19), but also because the reader as well as the poet is now engrossed in the thought of his or her own aging. The last line sounds as much as to say, if I were one of them myself, I would scream.

Aging matters to all living creatures and horses are no exceptions. In 'At Grass' the apparent nonexistence of the horses is only rarely confirmed as untrue by the eye. But the occasional movements won't last long and they soon blend with the shade. This seeming absence and temporary presence give birth to the sad, submissive mood which infiltrates the triumphal history of their past told in second and third stanzas and shadows rest of the lines until the end when :

Only the groom, and the groom's boy,
 With bridles in the evening come. (LD, p. 45)

No wonder the comment by Cox and Dyson: 'The placing of the simple word "come" at the very end of the poem suggests the inevitability of the horses' fate. As they are taken back to the stables, it is as if, as with all men, they are submitting to death.'⁶⁾ Their fate is as definite as the tone suggests, but it has not come yet. In the meantime they stand 'anonymous'.

More often than not, people are not even introduced to the reader in a direct way. They are mentioned perfunctorily as an introduction of the poet's contemplation. All the easier for the poet to let them pass away. Their peripheral presence is to be dissipated straight away as the reader is drawn deeper into the poet's reflecting mind. See dancers in 'Reasons for Attendance' (*LD*, p. 18), 'she' in 'Love Songs in Age' (*WW*, p. 12), and Arnold in 'Self's the Man' (*WW*, p. 24-25), to name but a few.

This tendency can be understood as a result of Larkin's undertaking to reinterpret the immediate world without any preconceptions or making use of any clichés. He once was an alien in Ireland and there confirmed his bent for the English establishment.⁷ Nevertheless, he remained marginal in English society. Larkin's mind is always at work as he watches with alien eyes his society's change into a thinner and hollower one.

III

Filling the empty space of Larkin's depopulated world is the undeniably solid presence of objects. Sometimes the objects are the left-behind debris of the vanishing human beings; on other occasions they replace the human beings altogether. 'Church Going', 'Going Going' and 'Here' are the conspicuous instances of the former; 'Friday Night in the Royal Station Hotel' and 'Ambulances', the latter. In both cases the objects' positively substantial presences make the reader experience the receding presence of people. The latter examples are more characteristic and are worth close attention.

Human dependence on the ambulances and an unescapable visit by them make their appearance on the scene already imposing. But the way they are depicted magnifies the way they function rather than the people whom they are for.

Closed like confessionals, they thread
Loud noons of cities, giving back

None of the glances they absorb.
 Light glossy grey, arms on a plaque,
 They come to rest at any kerb:
 All streets in time are visited.

(*WW*, p. 33)

Ambulances are the dominant figures in the cities, in the streets and at the kerbs. People can be detected by 'the glances' they give but how light the weight of the word is compared with the ambulances' undisturbed firmness, 'closed like confessionals', and their determined manners, 'giving back / None of the glances they absorb.' The following stanzas convey the sense that people are at their mercy and that people cannot but yield to these visitants. The overall effect of the poem is the tangible and firm physicality of the ambulances.

A particular feature of this phenomenon is that objects bear aspects of human characteristics. Tangible objects in 'Friday Night in the Royal Station Hotel' work as an embodiment of dinginess, isolation, loneliness, and exile. But not only that.

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 carpet.

(*HW*, p. 18)

Here is an ordinary deserted inside of a hotel. But 'silence laid like carpet'? The physically qualified silence produces a curious effect on the so far commonplace expressions. It sheds a new light on the previous lines and, reread, each line starts to present an animate quality; light spreads, lights cluster, empty chairs face each other, the dining-room declares and knives and glass are lonely. Objects manifest a mystic humanisation as if overloaded with human emotions. On the other hand the presence of human being can be sensed very little. 'A porter reading an unsold evening newspaper' (*HW*, p. 18) does not stand out but is a near

absence. And the full ashtrays left behind are the only trace of the salesmen's presence.

IV

Larkin has always been, and still is, recognised as a champion of the less deceived. Larkin's own words support this view: 'Poetry is an affair of sanity, of seeing things as they are'.⁸⁾ However, what I have remarked so far is that the outcome is not only 'expository, documentary, empirical and rational'⁹⁾ but also visionary and apocalyptic. The world he presents to the reader is dismal and dark. Yet Larkin's poetic vein did not stop there. It is also true of his poetry that there are moments of extraordinary breaks from the rest, heaving in sight, because of their beauty and their genuineness. These moments are rare, making them all the more sparkling. Natural objects are employed as similes or symbols and gather force and beauty to transcend their presence, their intensity inviting the reader to see them as almost a hope and answer to our life, if not entirely a revelation.

'This Be the Verse', for example, seems to have its poetic power in the line, 'Men hands on misery to man. / It deepens like a coastal shelf' (*HW*, p. 30). Taken out of context, these words may not strike one as spectacular, but the steady rhythm and the abrupt dark generalisation make a complete rupture in the middle of the gabbling floating tone of the other lines. The simile 'coastal shelf', above all, stands out due to its stational weighty concreteness.

In 'The Building', people's destiny in death presides over throughout the poem as materialised in doors, rooms and 'more rooms, yet, each further off / And harder to return from.' Contrast-ed with the building's looming tactile figure is the feeble human struggle against death's tyrannical power. The struggle to no purpose is crystalised in the last line :

This place accepts. All know they are going to die.
 Not yet, perhaps not here, but in the end,
 And somewhere like this. That is what it means,

This clean-sliced cliff; a struggle to transcend
 The thought of dying, for unless its powers
 Outbuild cathedrals nothing contravenes
 The coming dark, though crowds each evening try

With wasteful, weak, propitiatory flowers. (HW, p. 26)

The beauty of the flowers is intrinsic and the tenacious but inefficacious rhythm of the last line renders the beauty audible like a sigh of yearning.

Water is another natural object Larkin's poems attach importance to. The intensity of their effects is diverse, but mysterious power flows out from these lines. 'Young steers are always scenting purer water / Not here but anywhere' ('Wires', LD, p. 27), 'Spring of all seasons most gratuitous, / Is fold of untaught flower, is race of water' ('Spring', LD, p. 36), 'An immense slackening ache. / As when, thawing the rigid landscape weeps' ('Faith Healing', WW, p. 15).

A variation of water, rain, finds profounder expression in 'The Whitsun Weddings', the title poem of Larkin's third book of poetry. The poem is about a train journey from his town to London. From Larkin's usual standpoint as an onlooker, but this time on a train, he observes and registers things that catch his eye. Thus observed things continually remind the reader of the viewer's position and the sun. He also starts to watch a wedding party 'curiously' whom, for a while, he did not see owing to his lack of interest. He notices that each member of the party has his or her own definition of the same happening. What people see with their physical eyes is not the same that they see with their minds' eyes. As the train draws near to London, he sees the capital

with visionary force. It is this very force that inspires the speaker to visualise an 'arrow-shower':

We slowed again,
And as the tightened brakes took hold, there swelled
A sense of falling, like an arrow-shower
Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain. (WW, p. 23)

The simile carries with it a sense of direction, purpose of revival, and hope for a fruitful reproduction. And this hopeful interpretation of the denouement is allowed because, to borrow from Tom Paulin, 'it's as though the scene and the perceiver have become fused, instead of remaining separate like a landscape and a pair of spectacles. This is the kind of effect which the Imagist poets sought early in the next century and, just sometimes, achieved.'¹⁰

Light images, at once in isolation and combined with water images are significant in Larkin's poetry. In an essay contributed to Larkin on his sixtieth birthday Seamus Heaney afforded an excellent insight into his poems.¹¹ Pointing out Larkin's deep-seated inclination towards beauty, particularly evident in the use of light images, Heaney illuminates the poems with a poet's skill from 'Solar' which he professes to be 'most unexpected and daring, close to the pulse of primitive poetry, unprotected by any sleight of tone or persona' and in which the poet 'is bold to stand uncovered in the main of light, far from the hatless one who took off cycle-clips in awkward reverence'¹² on to 'Deceptions' whose 'light-filled dilation at the heart of the poem which transposes it from lament to comprehension and prepares the way for the sharp irony of the concluding lines'¹³ and to 'High Windows' at the end of which 'one kind of brightness, the brightness of belief in liberation and amelioration, falls from the air which immediately fills with a different, infinitely neutral splendour.'¹⁴

What can be added to his exhaustive examination is the poem 'Aubade'. Many believed the poem his last piece of writing, because the speaker is face to face with an urgent threat of death

in the darkness of night. But attention should be called to the fact that, even at an intense moment of the poet's unflinched gaze at death, there is an ingrained faith in what is to come as morning dawns :

Slowly light strengthens, and the room takes shape.
 It stands plain as a wardrobe, what we know,
 Have always known, know that we can't escape,
 Yet can't accept. One side will have to go.¹⁵⁾

The light is faint, still bright enough to make the room visible. The steady steps it strengthens are conveyed by the reassuring rhythm of the independent line.

V

As a serious commentator and expositor, Larkin's poetic legacy is a blank visionary sense and sight of the present time and the time to come: the absence of living things and the occupation of objects produced by human hands. We should not neglect that he also presented to us the possibility of positive beauty and hope in life, the possibility we can detect in his poems, at some times, faintly, and, at others, clearly. Larkin's death left the possibility as we take it, no more, no less. Yet we have at this moment a poet whose magical verbal force endeavours to fill up the emptied space Larkin exhibited. Seamus Heaney is the poet and it would be our future subject to see how he transfigures Larkin's world. Let us look at one of Heaney's poems as a conclusion. See how masterfully he first materialises the sun and then evokes the absent person's spirit to infuse her with a rare physicality.

There was a sunlit absence.
 The helmeted pump in the yard
 heated its iron,
 water honeyed

in the slung bucket
and the sun stood
like a griddle cooling
against the wall

of each long afternoon.
So, her hands scuffled
over the bakeboard,
the reddening stove

sent its plaque of heat
against her where she stood
in a floury apron
by the window.

Now she dusts the board
with a goose's wing,
now sits, broad-lapped,
with whitened nails

and measling shins:
here is a space
again, the scone rising
to the tick of two clocks.

And here is love
like a tinsmith's scoop
sunk past its gleam
in the meal-bin.¹⁶⁾

So, the absence is filled. Her presence so serene and so caring, closely connected to the sun's light, is one of life-giving. Moreover, Larkin's light of dawn in 'Aubade' has turned into an effusion of light.

Notes

Page references to Larkin's main verse collections are given in the text, using the following abbreviations:

HW *High Windows* (London: Faber & Faber, 1974)

LD *The Less Deceived* (1955: repr. Hessle/ Marvell Press, 1966)

WW *The Whitsun Weddings* (London: Faber & Faber, 1964)

- 1) KODAMA Sanechika, MURATA Tatsuo, YAKUSHIGAWA Koichi, SAKAMOTO Yoshiharu and SUGINO Toru, *Philip Larkin Shishu*, (Philip Larkin Collected Poem) (Tokyo: Kokubunsha, 1988). Translation of several poems has been tried before this date. For example, the thirty-fifth volume of *Complete Twentieth Century World Literature* published by Shueisha, Tokyo, includes five poems, 'Whitsun Weddings', 'An Arundel Tomb', 'Church Going', 'Wants' and 'Going' in Japanese translation.
- 2) Barbara Everett, 'Philip Larkin: After Symbolism', *Essays in Criticism*, 30, (1980), pp. 227-42.
- 3) Terry Whalen, *Philip Larkin and English Poetry* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd. 1986), p. 10.
- 4) *ibid.*
- 5) 'Dazzling' can be read literally; that is, the moon-blanching lawn is dazzling to the eye. Professor SAKURAI, in his translation of the poem, takes it literally. Cf. *The Rising Generation*, vol. CXXXV, no. 2, May 1, 1989, p. 66.
- 6) C.B. Cox and A.E. Dyson, *Modern Poetry* (London: Edward Arnold, 1963) p. 141.
- 7) See 'The Importance of Elsewhere' (*WW*, p. 34).
- 8) Philip Larkin, *Required Writing* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983), p. 197.
- 9) Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin* (New York: Methuen, 1982), p. 12.
- 10) Tom Paulin, *Thomas Hardy. The Poetry of Perception* (London: Macmillan, 1975), p. 32.
- 11) Seamus Heaney, "The Main of Light", *Larkin at Sixty* ed. Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), p. 132. This essay was later published in Seamus Heaney, *Government of the Tongue* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988).
- 12) *ibid.* p. 133.
- 13) *ibid.* p. 134.

- 14) *ibid.* p. 137.
- 15) Philip Larkin, *Collected Poems*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London: Marvel Press and Faber and Faber, 1988), p. 209.
- 16) Seamus Heaney, 'Sunlight', *North*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1975) p. 8.