



Tireless play: speculations on Larkin's 'Absences'

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Absences¹

Rain patters on a sea that tilts and sighs.
Fast-running floors, collapsing into hollows,
Tower suddenly, spray-haired. Contrariwise, 3
A wave drops like a wall: another follows,
Wilting and scrambling, tirelessly at play
Where there are no ships and no shallows. 6

Above the sea, the yet more shoreless day,
Riddled by wind, trails lit-up galleries:
They shift to giant ribbing, sift away. 9

Such attics cleared of me! Such absences!

Larkin's *terza rima* is a rare seascape/skyscape from someone who is thought of as an essentially urban poet. 'Absences', were it not for that last line, might strike the reader as a peculiarly successful descriptive poem, attaining what Larkin called in an autobiographical fragment the 'fabulous bird' of 'positive objectivity'.² But the final exclamation, taking advantage of the special impact accorded to last lines of *terza rimas*, changes everything. It paradoxically asserts the absence of the self, whilst introducing the self in dramatic fashion. This eruption can be seen as a lyrical commentary on the preceding nine lines, washing the reader back to reassess the description not just as a description of sea and sky but very specifically of a scene which gains dizzying value from the fact that the poet is not there. But a re-reading might also perversely push one to colour the description more lyrically, tingeing the positive objectivity with a more personal symbolism. One might even see the changing skyscape (lines 7-9), with the clouds, first rain-bearing and then sun-infused, thinning as they recede into the distance, as a prefigurement of the clearing of the self; the 'sift away' from this perspective would culminate a reading (advocated by Andrew Motion) in which the poem mimes 'the processes of change and purgation experienced by the speaker'.³ In other words, the scene described is far from neutral on re-reading but a subtle correlative of the poet's own

mood (combining suggestions of weariness ['sighs', 'collapsing', 'drops', 'wilting'] and energy ['fast-running', 'tower suddenly', 'tirelessly at play']).

Without the last line, the poem would keep silent on the fiction of the observerless scene or provoke in the literal-minded reader some poet-figure, say, on the prow of a boat. The last line explodes the latter reading and appears to promote the observerless fiction to the key focus of the poem, suggesting that it is the absolute, raw freedom of the open sea and sky, liberated from the cluttering presence of the poet-observer, that excites. But we know that the observerlessness is a fiction, that each utterance has a self and that the self as speaker, once explicitly introduced, cannot even feign disappearance. Indeed, the intimation of the self as encumbrance or embarrassment ('cleared of me') suggests something more, a deeper self-criticism that goes beyond the play between objective and lyrical readings of descriptive text. Why should the poet celebrate so triumphantly his own exclusion? Is it his own tainted self that threatens the purity of scene? Is there something more in this last line than 'a joyous assertion of freedom'⁴?

What, for example, are the resonances of the strange choice of the word 'attics'? On one level, it continues the metaphorical tasks assigned to 'floors', 'tower', 'wall' and 'galleries', all architectural reference points that seek to give manmade structure to natural phenomena and signal the limitations of depicting nature in its true rawness. But the anaphoric 'such', in tempting the reader to assume that the sea- and skylines are being compared to emptied attics, offers a startling compression of space from the vast, open vistas of lines 1-9. Can the towering seas and giant galleries of the sky really be redescribed as attics? The shock may provoke another interpretation. The associations of attics with literary creation are part of the Romantic myth. If we accept the implications of the fact that (as we shall see) Larkin ascribes a certain Frenchness to 'Absences', then Baudelaire's 'Paysage' from the 'Tableaux parisiens' section of *Les Fleurs du mal* offers a straightforward intertext; the poet in his garret wilfully creates an imaginary poetic universe to escape from the tribulations of the everyday, a landscape from within the confines of a shuttered room.⁵ The 'attics cleared of me' could point to the sweeping aside of such mythic self-portraits with their inevitable subjectivity. Or, bearing in mind other contemporary Larkin texts, such as 'Deceptions' (February 1950) and 'Unfinished Poem' (1951), one might view the attic as a place of sexual guilt, shame, disappointment and fear; in the first of these poems, 'fulfilment's desolate attic' represents emotional emptiness at the moment of expected satiation; in the second, 'that emaciate attic' is the speaker's chosen place to await death. These textual attics, whether a part of a myth-kitty or a tighter network of personal intertexts, reinforce a reading of the final exclamation as the reflective poet's response to some inner revelation, a leap from the external models of infinity and purity to what would be his own emotional equivalent as poet. It is a realisation that literary places and poses might be swept clean by some yearned-for objectivity. There were, of course, real attics in Larkin's life. He lived in two in Leicester when, from 1946-50, he was a sub-librarian at the then University College and gave 'romantically decrepit'⁶ accounts of them in letters to friends. So Larkin had witnessed at least two attics cleared of him before he left Leicester to become sub-librarian at Queen's University, Belfast in September 1950.

Larkin wrote 'Absences' soon after he arrived in Northern Ireland (but not at some attic desk – he lived in a hall of residence opposite the Queen's University in a room with 'the minimum of furniture in it'⁷) and published it for the first time in *The Less Deceived* (1955). According to Andrew Motion,⁸ it is one of seven poems that Larkin wrote between his arrival in Belfast and the end of 1950. The others were presumably 'The Spirit Wooed', 'No Road', 'Wires', 'Since the majority of me...', 'Arrival'⁹ and possibly

There follow two pages of heavy editing of all the text (with the exception of the first three lines which have by now taken their almost final shape) but particularly of the prospective conclusion. Then something remarkable happens. Larkin, noting the date '28/11/50' in the margin, appears to begin on an entirely new conception:

Such attics cleared of me! such absences!
~~_____ is filling fills again, the case~~
~~But the courtroom [illegible] _____ restarts~~
But here the courtroom fills, the case restarts,
Dingy coughing, argument.

The turn of the poem is dramatic: 'But here the courtroom...' suggests the severest of contrasts with the 'there' of the empty, purified sea- and skylscapes. The apparently new movement is however the resumption ('the case restarts') of something suspended which predates the observerless description. An inner dialogue testing the conscience? An uneasy self-arraignment? On the following page 116 (where more space is taken up with a return to the draft of another poem, 'Since the majority of me...'), Larkin writes:¹³

Such attics cleared of me! such absences!
We cannot leave the courtroom and the case,
The stale and dingy coughing

What has weakened is the contrastive ('But here..') linkage with the sea- and skylscape; it is nevertheless still there, hinted at in the allusion to departure denied ('We cannot leave'), an attempt to escape from the spleen into the ideal. The loosened connection threatens the narrative (always tenuous) to the extent that one begins to wonder how Larkin envisaged the reworked text belonging to the same poem as 'Rain patters...'. The suspicion grows when 'Rain patters...' is never returned to and the courtroom scene itself disappears from the *Workbook* for twelve pages, re-emerging on p. 128:¹⁴

Such attics cleared of me! Such absences!
Such courtroom consolations! for my case
Is all dingy inaudibilities

And, somewhere guilt. Thinking of any place
I cannot cheapen lessens the disgrace.

Such attics cleared of me! such absences!
Such courtroom consolations in a case
Made up of stale inaudibilities

With somewhere guilt. The thought of any place
Uncheapened by this vague drawn out disgrace

On its return, the courtroom text seeks greater integration with what precedes: the third exclamation ('Such courtroom consolations!') looks backward as part of the sudden reflection on the sea- and skylscape, as well as taking the poem forward into the new introspective drama. The whole narrative clarifies. The crafted musings on sea and sky are now presented as daydream consolations, relief from the anxiety of unfocused self-arraignment. The text here states openly both the purity of the natural which resists

tainting ('any place/ I cannot cheapen'; 'any place/ Uncheapened') and the power of the imagined scene to provide a muting of the poet's inner shame.

With the *Workbook* offering no further drafts, one might assume that Larkin, unconvinced by the emerging broken-backed poem, moves radically to the final published version. Had this final version retained the courtroom drama, the exclamations would have been the place of articulation between exterior and interior, objective and subjective, descriptive and narrative. The hypothetical poem would have buttressed Motion's biographical view of the poet struggling with guilt and shame during his early days in Belfast. Instead, by jettisoning the 'stale inaudibilities' in an act of compositional cleansing, Larkin leaves us with a poem ending suggestively with an ambiguous line of exclamation which may indeed be 'a joyous assertion of freedom' as well as an oblique confession of inner guilt and dinginess. The draft presence of an alternative untitled poem also allows a readier appreciation of his decision to persevere with the *terza rima* (some of the text excised had cast doubt on how far the form would be sustained), to collapse the first two tercets into one block of text (so that the thinning from six to three to one line to blankness mimes the sifting towards absence) and to use the last word as an echo of the title, offering some kind of bulwark to the structure.

'Absences' remained one of Larkin's favourite poems,¹⁵ celebrated as such in *Poet's Choice* (1962) where he explains why he chose it to represent his work:

I suppose I like 'Absences' (a) because of its subject matter – I am always thrilled by the thought of what places look like when I am not there; (b) because I fancy it sounds like a different, better poet rather than myself. The last line, for instance, sounds like a slightly unconvincing translation from a French symbolist. I wish I could write like this more often.¹⁶

The simple, personalised discourse and its stark refusal of any theoretical embellishment are typical of Larkin's (occasionally disingenuous) approach to talking about his own poetry. The simplicity should not deceive; it challenges those who would wish to draw a poetics from his words.

The first reason for Larkin's affection for the poem is, it is claimed, 'its subject matter', namely the vertigo of imagining places from which he is absent, whether they be the open sea or attics; this subject matter thrills him twelve years after the poem was written through a kind of revisiting. Larkin himself later said that the poem showed 'a desire to get away from it all'. If that formulation sounds too casual, too resonant of holiday brochures, then Larkin risks, unusually for him, a deeper wording: 'One longs for infinity and absence, the beauty of somewhere you're not'.¹⁷ The poem's subject matter is one of Larkin's most enduring, whether it be expressed in the verse, or in spiritual language or more straightforward prose. And subject matter, for Larkin, is what matters.

In 'The Living Poet',¹⁸ Larkin makes a distinction between, on the one hand, the impact of a poet's character and environment on what he writes and, on the other, the subject of the poems. The character and environment are fateful presences that the poet cannot ignore ('either one writes about them or to escape from them'). The subject of a poem, contrariwise, has the capacity to 'restore the balance and let in some fresh air', leaving behind the constraints of personality and place that surround the genesis of the poem. It clears the clutter of the contingent. Or rather it tries to. Larkin accepts that the subjects of poems too 'are chosen by our own natures... but blessedly the links are for the most part out of sight and the subjects free themselves to expand'. This liberation of the subjects

from the 'preoccupations that chose them' is itself an act which, over time, empties the poem of the poet. This emptying, for a poet revisiting a poem, has a particularly poignant thrill. Where has that self gone? Does the poem itself become a space that can touch the poet simply because he is no longer there? Or is the memory of the genesis inescapable?

Before I come back to the second reason for Larkin's affection for 'Absences' ('it sounds like a different, better poet...'), there is an irresistible exchange on the poem by Larkin and a well-meaning correspondent in 1961, a year before Larkin chose it to represent his work. It is irresistible because of the clash of perspectives. A marine biologist, Frank Evans, had written to Larkin:

When I first read the poem... I thought: He's got his images wrong. Like so many people who walk along the shore and watch the breakers rolling in he thinks that waves in the open do the same. But it is only waves coming in to the beach that roll over and drop like a wall; offshore, no matter how big the waves are, when they break the water just spills down the front. It is the size and not the shape of deep-water waves that changes with the wind strength. Whether in storms or summer breezes makes no difference to the profile of breaking waves.¹⁹

This matter-of-fact intrusion into 'what places look like when I'm not there' could have been ignored by Larkin on grounds of poetic licence (although this excuse would scarcely have been consistent with his espousal of the real). Instead, he alludes contritely to Mr Evans's letter in his contribution to *Poet's Choice*:

Incidentally, an oceanographer wrote to me pointing out that I was confusing two kinds of wave, plunging waves and spilling waves, which seriously damaged the poem from a technical viewpoint. I am sorry about this, but do not see how to amend it now.

And he had penned a reply to Mr Evans with his usual courtesy and humour:

Thank you for your extremely interesting letter. It seems to me I was confusing two kinds of waves, for I was certainly thinking of 'spilling waves in deep water', as you call them. This makes nonsense of dropping like a wall, if they in fact never slope more than 1 in 7. I hope not too many of my readers are oceanographers. I suppose the only waves in deep water I have ever seen have been from boats, which might themselves upset the water's behaviour, but I certainly had the impression of waves playing about on their own like porpoises (I've never seen a p. either) and was trying to reproduce it.²⁰

The irony is directed at the self-deprecating portrait of the bookish poet who knows the word better than the thing ('I've never seen a p.'), an irony amplified by the hollowness of the authority that is supposed to be at the base of all similes. But there is also a deeper reflection hidden beneath the comment on the presence of the boat affecting the water's behaviour, which can be viewed as a metaphor of the observer changing what is observed, of the presence of consciousness upsetting the thrilling fiction of unobserved, raw reality. What Larkin is celebrating in 'Absences' is precisely the lack of the poet's presence, the stripping away of Romantic/Symbolist notions of contemplation and absorption of self into a land- or seascape (as pre-eminently in Valéry's 'Le Cimetière marin', for example). He wants to reproduce raw nature 'where there are no ships'; in

trying to do so, he makes a technical mistake which brings with it the traces of the very solipsism he is seeking to avoid.

Larkin's second reason for liking 'Absences' is 'because I fancy that it sounds like a different, better poet rather than myself'. He cites as an example of that difference the last line which 'sounds like a slightly unconvincing translation from a French symbolist'. In *A Writer's Life*, Andrew Motion refers to the poet's output in late 1950 after his move to Belfast: 'in two poems he wrote before the end of the year, "Absences" and the unpublished "Verlaine", he adapted French sources'.²¹ It is not clear which French sources Motion had in mind for 'Absences'. The poem he refers to as 'Verlaine' is a robust effort at a direct translation of one of Verlaine's ruder poems, 'A Mademoiselle ***' from *Parallèlement*. But there is no equivalent original of 'Absences'. At most, it echoes (sometimes faintly) seascapes found in Baudelaire ('Le Voyage'), Rimbaud ('Le Bateau ivre', 'Mouvement') and Valéry ('Le Cimetière marin'). For Larkin, the sense of the last line being a translation might have been provoked by the structural (and thematic?) similarities with the last, isolated line of Gautier's 'Terza Rima':

Sublime aveuglement! magnifique défaut!

This latter poem is anthologised by Berthon in *Nine French Poets*, a text that, according to Arthur Terry,²² was part of Larkin's extensive reading in his early months in Belfast. One might note, in passing, that it also contained Gautier's 'Symphonie en blanc majeur' (the inspiration for Larkin's title, 'Sympathy in White Major') and Baudelaire's 'L'Homme et la Mer' (with its last, split line, 'O lutteurs éternels, ô frères implacables!' and direct reflections on the relationship between the moods of man and sea).

Quite why Larkin should think that writing like a French symbolist is a reason for his liking 'Absences' is on the surface surprising. His view of translations of poems was not favourable:

Translations always perplex me. I frankly confess I cannot judge whether such lines as

Blurring with flowers the eyes of human leopards,
I've whirled Floridas none yet set eyes on

produce in me the emotion awoken in a French reader by

J'ai heurté, savez-vous, d'incroyables Florides
Mêlant aux fleurs des yeux de panthères à peaux
D'hommes!

Almost all poetic translations seem to me condemned to be poetic zombies, assemblages of properties walking around with no informing intelligence or soul.²³

Mischievously quoting one of Roy Campbell's less happy renderings of lines from Rimbaud's 'Le Bateau ivre', Larkin makes an important point. Why then should a 'slightly unconvincing translation from a French symbolist' so commend itself? The answer must lie in the power that Larkin attaches to being different from himself. Here too, there is the temptation to read this distancing as a self-reflexive enactment of absence, a paradoxical creation of a text from which the writer's self is at one remove.

Is 'Absences' then a poem of multiple liberations? The poet liberated from his shame. The poem liberated from its genesis. The writer liberated from his style. If so, then the text takes on layered readings, a hermeneutic ribbing that nudges one from positive objectivity to lyrical correlations to self-referentiality – and overwhelmingly to an enriching problematisation of the poem. Before one becomes too dizzily involved in the reflexivity and the tireless play of levels, it might be salutary to listen to Larkin's own caution on the limits of liberation. Having qualified, in 'The Living Poet', his definition of the most successful poems as those in which 'subjects *appear* to float free' [italics mine] and 'to exist in their own right, reassembled – one hopes – in the eternity of the imagination', Larkin immediately reels himself back in from the edge of literary fancy with an assertive 'But' and a cryptic anecdote:

But I am frequently reminded of a story Forrest Reid tells about himself as a boy, lying in bed and watching the swallows nesting in the eaves of University Street, Belfast. Realising they had flown all the way from Africa, he was astonished that with the whole world to choose from they should have picked University Street, Belfast.²⁴

In other words, the subject matter, having been set free from the poet, returns through some mysterious process to the place of its genesis and circumstance of its creation. For the poet revisiting his poem is akin to the swallow nesting again in attic eaves long vacated. So when Larkin chooses 'Absences' as a favourite poem, it might be because, paradoxically, its subject matter is recurrently present ('I am always thrilled...') but also because the subject born in the poet's desolate room in Belfast has the power to reconnect magically with a moment of creative triumph over shame and guilt.

Belfast, of course, is a city that Larkin looked back on with affection from his high windows in Hull. He is not alone in sensing that those who leave that magnetic city each carry swallows of memory.²⁵

Such absences!

¹ The text of the poem is reprinted from *The Less Deceived* by kind permission of the Marvell Press, England and Australia.

² Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin: a Writer's Life*, Faber and Faber, 1993, p. 139.

³ *Philip Larkin*, Contemporary Writers, Routledge, 1982, p. 75.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 75.

⁵ There are other Baudelairean echoes in Larkin's verse at this time. 'The Face', for example, replays the chance urban encounter of Baudelaire's 'A une Passante'.

⁶ The phrase is Andrew Motion's in *A Writer's Life*, p. 150. He cites two excerpts from Larkin's letters describing his first Leicester attic, the first written to Jim Sutton, the second to Kingsley Amis: 'It is a medium-sized attic, with carpet and bed, and I sit in a basket chair by a reading lamp with an electric radiator pointed cunningly up my arse and a brown rug over my shoulders', and 'I am established in an attic with a small window, a bed, an armchair, a basket chair, a carpet, a reading lamp THAT DOESN'T WORK, a small electric fire THAT DOESN'T WORK and few books, papers, etc. "Literary men" like us count ourselves *kings of a nutshell* when we have at hand the company of "the gentle Elia" or "rare Ben", eh?'. Motion (*A Writer's Life*, p. 171) cites a further extract from a Jim Sutton letter, describing Larkin's second Leicester attic: 'Picture me in another garret – or no, garrets are supposed to be romantic; say a maid's bedroom – with a bed [...], a dressing table plus drawers, a fireplace plus gas fire *plus* meter, an armchair with a disconcertingly sliding seat, a small table (three and a quarter inches by one and three-quarter inches roughly) and hard chair, large cupboard and bookcase. The bed was very hard, like a dried-up watercourse.'

⁷ *Philip Larkin, Selected Letters 1940-1985*, edited by Anthony Thwaite, Faber and Faber, p. 167.

⁸ *A Writer's Life*, p. 203.

⁹ For these six poems, see *Philip Larkin: Collected Poems*, ed. Anthony Thwaite, Faber and Faber, 1988, pp. 46-51

¹⁰ Larkin's workbooks are held in the Larkin Archive of the Brynmor Jones Library at the University of Hull. . Previously unpublished Philip Larkin material: copyright © 200- [Year of Festschrift publication], the Estate of Philip Larkin. All citations from *Workbook 2* are reproduced by kind permission of the Society of Authors as the literary representative of the estate of Philip Larkin.

¹¹ Between pages 109 and 111, there is the translation of Verlaine's 'A Mademoiselle ***'.

¹² A caveat: it is not possible to be absolutely certain that the order of the text as it appears in the *Workbook* is actually the order of composition. On the other hand, it seems highly likely to be the case.

¹³ The poet's editing of the draft on p. 116 is so heavy that I am only reproducing text that is not crossed through.

¹⁴ See previous footnote. The same applies.

¹⁵ For further evidence of his fondness for the poem, see *Selected Letters*, p. 263, 'I... have a special affection for ABSENCES' or 'An Interview with John Haffenden', in *Philip Larkin: Further Requirements*, ed. Anthony Thwaite, Faber and Faber, 2001, p. 61, where Larkin mentions 'Absences' as a candidate for his most typical poem.

¹⁶ From *Poet's Choice*, edited by P. Engle and J. Langland, Dial Press, 1962, cited in *Further Requirements*, p.17.

¹⁷ 'An Interview with John Haffenden', in *Further Requirements*, p. 59.

¹⁸ 'The Living Poet', BBC Third Programme, 3 July 1964 in *Further Requirements*, pp. 79-91.

¹⁹ *Selected Letters*, p. 332.

²⁰ *Selected Letters*, pp. 332-333.

²¹ *A Writer's Life*, p. 202.

²² Cited in *A Writer's Life*, p. 202.

²³ From Larkin's review of Roy Campbell's *Collected Poems* (*Guardian*, 25 March 1960) in *Further Requirements*, p. 225.

²⁴ *Further Requirements*, p. 79.

²⁵ The author lived in Belfast between 1970 and 1972 when he was a departmental colleague of Peter Broome's. He left to join the Department of French at the University of Hull.