

## NOTES

1. *The Letters of D.H. Lawrence*. vol 2. 1913-16 ed George J. Zytaruk and James T. Boulton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p 61.
2. Page references in the text refer to *The Complete Poems of D. H. Lawrence*. ed. V. de Sola Pinto and Warren Roberts (London: Heinemann, 1964).
3. Jillian de Vries-Mason, *Perception in the Poetry of D.H. Lawrence* (Berne: Peter Lang, 1982), p.180.
4. De Vries-Mason, p.179.
5. *Letters*, vol 2, p. 165.
6. 'The Spirit of Place', *Studies in Classic American Literature*, (1923; Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971), p. 8.

## Lawrence's Fish' Thérèse Vichy

By its title and subject-matter Lawrence's poem, written in 1921, cannot but seem partly reminiscent of Rupert Brooke's 'The Fish'. Lawrence wrote a review of the first volume of *Georgian Poetry*<sup>1</sup> in which Brooke's poem was published, quoting Brooke more abundantly than such poets as Masfield or Abercrombie. He quoted 'Dining-Room Tea' rather than 'The Fish'; but I suggest that this was due to the ambivalence of the latter's appeal to him. There is indeed in the two fish poems the same Heraclitean world of ever-renewed forgetfulness, of total absorption into 'the immediate present'(182),<sup>2</sup> as well as the same bliss of prenatal fusion of self and non-self. However different in temperament, both Brooke and Lawrence suffered from the same Oedipus complex, the same sexual ambivalence,<sup>3</sup> and this accounts for their common fascination with flux and flow, with fish as emblems of prenatal life. There are, however, great differences, as Brooke's manner achieves empathy through sensuous brilliancy, a flamboyant impressionism which at times lapses into Victorian clichés. Remaining univocal it fails to integrate complex levels of meaning, emotional, intellectual, mythical with the texture of the poem. If James Elroy Flecker saluted Brooke as 'Donne Redivivus',<sup>4</sup> my aim is to argue that it is Lawrence's 'Fish' which has the real complexity of Metaphysical poetry, a complexity sometimes cultivated in deliberate contradistinction to Brooke's poem

There is, as I have said, the same bliss of fusion, of absorption into 'the immediate present':

Submerged  
And wave-thrilled.  
As the waters roll  
Roll you.  
The waters wash,  
You wash in oneness  
And never emerge. (334-5)

But Lawrence makes a point of avoiding Brooke's flamboyance. The too obvious word 'ripple' is never used and paradoxically it is the very paucity of the vocabulary which is turned to expressive ends. The alliterations, the repetitions of the same verb with different subjects, merge everything into oneness. Above all, detached observation and sensuous empathy meet and enhance each other as they never do with Brooke: 'Your life a sluice of sensation along your sides' (335). Coupled with the word 'sensation', 'sluice'



achieves a remarkable tension between the organic/internal and the mechanical/ external, without losing anything of its phonetic closeness to verbs like 'slip' or 'slide'. The line thus gives a splendid sense of novelty and freshness, as in 'A flush at the flails of your fins, down the whorl of your tail', (335) where the same delicate balance is maintained between the visible/external and the internal. Mimetically propelling the line to its end with rhythmical rapidity, the alliteration in 'f' and 'fl' the internal rhyme, 'flail/tail' heighten by contrast the phonetic value of 'whorl', and consequently its visual effect. Similarly but with less felicity, I think, in:

To speak endless inaudible wavelets into the wave;  
To breathe from the flood at the gills, (336)

sensuous empathy is rendered in terms of its opposite, mute sensation in terms of speech.

In the lines

You and the naked element,  
Sway-wave.  
Curvetting bits of tin in the evening light. (335)

extremes meet. The displacement of 'naked' from fish to their element, and the blurring of grammatical categories with 'sway-wave', which becomes a compound verb, create an effect of fusion; but 'curvetting bits of tin' stands at the opposite pole of detached observation, as fish are ironically turned into baits shining in the depth of water. 'Curvetting' with its half convulsive horse-leap is deliberately taken up further on when a fish is turned into a tantalizing, visual object:

And to spring away with a curvetting click in the  
air,  
Provocative.  
Dropping back with a slap on the face of the  
flood. (337)

In a sort of synaesthesia, the auditory notations ('click', 'slap') complete and sharpen the visual effect. Thus Lawrence's detached naturalism shows an inventiveness, as in the displacement from horse to fish, unknown to Brooke

Without losing anything of its complexity, as we shall see later, the poem maintains its empathy:

Food, of course!  
Water-eager eyes,  
Mouth-gate open  
And strong spine urging, driving;  
And desirous belly gulping.

Fear also! . . .  
A rush that almost screams (336)

Here again 'mouth-gate' takes up the internal/external tension. The alliteration in 's' and the verbs of movement urge the line onward, while the noise of speed and flight is metaphorised into a scream of terror, reversing pursuit into escape. 'Desirous' is ambiguous and connects ironically with:

Food, and fear, and joie de vivre,  
Without love. (336)

This insistence that fish know no love marks a sharp departure from naturalism. This is where the poem clearly and probably intentionally diverges from Brooke's, from its univocal brilliancy and muddled moral. It integrates several levels of symbolic meaning, at once esoteric, cosmic and intimately personal to Lawrence. In the line 'And water wetly on fire in the grates of your gills' (335), 'grates', while repeating the external/internal poise, suggests an inner fire whose oxymoronic value derives from John Burnet's *Early Greek Philosophy*: 'But fishes are very fiery, and take to the water to cool themselves' (331). The fish becomes a cosmic symbol of 'an inexplicable first duality, a division in the cosmos', a symbol of Lawrence's dualism inherited from Blake: 'the cosmic waters and the cosmic fire of the First Day', the beginning and the end, darkness and light in 'The Crown', the feminine and the masculine in *Study of Thomas Hardy*. This is partly why the title is not 'The Fish' with its abstract generalisation, but 'Fish' referring not only to the whole species, but to some mysterious primal substance. The 'discordant qualities' in Coleridge's phrase, of fire and water are not reconciled, they clash and at the same time are welded into a new unit, into 'this sense of conflict contained within a reconciliation', which everywhere inspired Lawrence's metaphysics and aesthetics, as for instance in the external/internal tension I have already stressed. In 'Fixed water-eyes' (335), fluidity and fixity, flow and intensity are brought together and made to exchange their respective qualities. In 'fish-fire' (336), the oxymoron is intensified by the alliteration, the opening of the short, tense vowel sound ('fish') into a diphthong ('fire'). In 'aqueous/sulphureous' (340), with its internal rhyme, rare enough to be striking, similarity of sound and dissimilarity of meaning are opposed and fused into some sort of



reconciliation, producing the effect noted by Valéry as specifically poetic: 'Le poème, hesitation prolongée entre le son et le sens.'<sup>8</sup> The fish embodies the dualism of the primeval cosmos, but not that of sex and gender as he was born 'before God was love', before 'the great urge that has not yet found a body' sought incarnation through the sex division ('The Body of God', 691). He belongs to an age when duality meant creativeness but not antagonism and friction, not the agony of being 'crucified into sex' ('Tortoise Shout', 364). He thus transcends the incompatibility between complete separateness and perfect relatedness, isolation and fusion, thereby fulfilling Lawrence's deepest wish. He is 'rounded off and finished' (364) in himself as we were before sex came into the world. He is without any 'bleeding of incompleteness', any reaching out of desire:

Never know,  
Never grasp.  
...  
No fingers, no hands and feet, no lips;  
...  
No loins of desire,  
None.  
...  
Himself all silvery himself  
In the element,  
No more. (335-336)

He is closed upon himself in complete self-sufficiency, and this is rendered not only by Lawrence's detached observation but by the impersonal verbal form, the infinitive in 'To be a fish!' (337). At the same time he is paradoxically the very embodiment of perfect relatedness. The 'magnetism that holds him in secret communion with his like:

They drive in shoals.  
But soundless, and out of contact.  
...  
A magnetism in the water between them only.  
(337)

resembles the 'unanimous instinct' of the people dancing in 'Autobiographical Fragment' and the 'sheer togetherness' of the porpoises in 'The Flying Fish'.<sup>10</sup> The lines:

You lie only with the waters:

One touch.

...  
Who lies with the waters of his silent passion,  
womb-element?  
- Fish in the waters . . . (335)

demonstrate that the fish's relation to his element is analogous to two things equally dear to Lawrence. The first is maternal symbiosis, flow through a living membrane. For Lawrence this remained the model, of all vital, personal interchange, and in his letter to Russell of 8 December 1915 is identified with 'blood-consciousness': The transmission from the blood of the mother to the embryo in the womb'.<sup>11</sup> The second, a substitute for maternal symbiosis, is the intimacy of touch in sleep 'shared with a beloved', as between Paul and his mother or Gilbert and Johanna in *Mr Noon*.<sup>12</sup> In the poem, the symbiotic quality of the relation is also conveyed in terms of streams flowing together without mingling: 'Fish-blood slowly running to the flood, . . .' (336). Similarly in 'Who swims enwombed?' the poise between the openness of 'swims' and the closure of 'enwombed' duplicates the tension between separateness and relatedness (335). The symbiosis, however, is reversed as the vital exchange is not through the mother's blood but the male sperm:

Who is it ejects his sperm to the naked flood?  
In the wave-mother? (335)

Incestuousness and sexual ambivalence are here obvious, but they may not be entirely devoid of humour as Lawrence seems to laugh covertly at this open reversal of roles, with the embryo turning into the male partner of his mother.

If the soft flow of the fish's mode of relatedness can be compared to the 'column of blood' in a 'valley of blood' which in *The Plumed Serpent* designates vital, non-frictional sex,<sup>13</sup> it is, in the poem, contrasted with the corrosiveness of sulphur, of frictional sex and love. Salt fits the allegory of Lot's wife and the bitterness of the woman's tears in the poem 'She Looks Back':

Still, the kiss was a touch of bitterness on my  
mouth  
Like salt, burning-in.  
...  
...corrosive salt!  
...burning, eating through  
my defenceless nakedness. (206-7)



Sulphur in the poem fits the fire/water duality but shares with salt the burning corrosiveness of 'the Aphrodite of the foam'<sup>14</sup> to which fish becomes an antidote:

Cats and the Neapolitans,  
Sulphur sun-beasts,  
Thirst for fish as for more-than-water;  
Water-alive  
To quench their over-sulphureous lusts. (340)

In 'sun-beasts' there is predatoriness as well as the violent self-consuming intensity of fire and sulphur. This is phonetically stressed by a pattern of assonances vividly different from those associated with flow, fish and water. However personal to Lawrence this opposition between vital symbiotic exchange and frictional sex may be, it is here, as we have already seen, not devoid of humour and ironic distancing. The rhetorical questions: 'who is it?'; the punning in 'What price *his* bread upon the waters?' (335); or the specific mention of Neapolitans provide ample evidence.

The poet thus maintains an astonishing flexibility of tone, that now opposes, now blends the non-human and the anthropomorphic. Whereas the fish reconciles isolation and relatedness, it is with the human mode of relationship that predatory will is repeatedly associated. By an ironical twist the pike is made anthropomorphically human in a humorous vignette:

A slim young pike, with smart fins  
And grey-striped suit, a young cub of a pike  
Slouching away below, half out of sight,  
Like a lout on an obscure pavement....  
Aha, there's somebody in the know! (338)

The 'I' of the poem becomes a monster whose fingers are as terrifying to the fish as an octopus to a human being:

And I, a many-fingered horror of daylight to him,  
Have made him die.

The dying fish brings a moment of poignant empathy:  
Unhooked his gorging, water-horny mouth,  
...  
And felt him beat in my hand, with his mucous  
leaping life-throb. (339)

Simultaneously the fish takes on that fixity which man can prey upon in things of beauty and works of art. Bodily fluids become punningly 'precious', turning to lacquer, gems and rare metals:

His red-gold, water-precious, mirror-flat bright eye;  
...  
And the gold-and-green pure lacquer-mucus  
comes off in my hand,  
...  
And the water-suave contour dims. (339)

With the refined choice of words, this is partly like a reversal of Yeats' Byzantium poems, as the point is about the stasis of beauty. But here, death at once transfixes beauty into what Lawrence, in 'Poetry of the Present', calls 'plasmic finality' (182) and makes it pathetically elusive. The poet's confrontation with the fish then becomes that of the human with the non-human, the cosmic mystery:

I had made a mistake, I did not know him,  
...  
I did not know his God.  
Which is perhaps the last admission that life has to  
wring out of us.  
...  
And my heart accused itself  
Thinking: *I am not the measure of creation.* (338-9)

This confrontation provides a rich interplay of irony, wit and esoteric symbolism. An image of the poet, ready like Sappho in *Study of Thomas Hardy* to leap over the pale into the unknown:

They are beyond me, are fishes.  
I stand at the pale of my being  
And look beyond,...

slips into that of a fisherman waiting for a catch:

As one stands on a bank and looks in.  
I have waited with a long rod

The passage is a parody of spiritual quest as the catch at the end of the line is



transformed into an emblem of saintliness, a halo round the poet's head:

And had him fly like a halo round my head,  
Lunging in the air on the line. (338-9)

'Had him fly' links up with the categories of above and below, and hints at a parodic version of Jesus the Fisher of Men, Jesus the Uplifter in the poem 'St Matthew':

So I will be lifted up, Saviour,  
But put me down in time, Master,  
Before my heart stops beating, and I become what  
I am not. (321)

Here Lawrence self-mockingly assumes the role of Jesus, and the fish not put down in time, dies. Similarly his 'curvetting' flight into the air, out of his element, is ironically and anthropomorphically metaphorized in terms of sex division:

To have the element under one like a lover;  
And to spring away with a curvetting click in the air,  
Provocative.  
Dropping back with a slap on the face of the  
flood. (339)

'Curvetting' seems to draw some cryptic sign in the air, a semicircle that punningly connects with the 'halo round my head' and:

Fishes  
...  
They move in other circles. (339)

Those 'other circles' form a conceit, as they are also those of the Zodiac, with Pisces the 12th sign, reminiscent of a cosmic order that man has cut himself off from or wilfully reversed like Gethin Day's wife in Lawrence's notes for 'The Flying Fish': 'weather-vane is a fish, and below, the Zodiac revolves. She causes it to reverse ... the vane is reversed, fish belly up'.<sup>15</sup> In 'Astronomical Changes' it is the whole cosmos that has grown out of joint:

Dawn is no longer in the house of the Fish  
...  
The whole great heavens have shifted over, and

slowly pushed aside  
the Cross, the Virgin, Pisces, the Sacred Fish (616)

Whereas man with his will and disincarnate spirituality dispenses only death, the fish becomes a mystic, esoteric symbol of birth to a non-human dimension, where opposites like isolation and relatedness can be reconciled; birth to that other reality, the unknown, that lies over the edge and cannot be caught with a line and a rod. As always with Lawrence, that initiation is also a death, an ultimate surrender: as in 'Tortoise Shout', giving up the ghost/receiving the ghost' (365). 'The Proper Study' provides, in that respect, an illuminating commentary on the end of the poem:

Danger! Don't go over the edge!  
But I've got to go over the edge. The way lies that  
way.  
Flop! Over we go, and into the endless sea. There  
drown ...  
When you fall into the final sea of *I Don't Know*,  
then if you can but gasp *Teach Me*, you turn into a  
fish ... and grope in amazement, in a new element.  
That's why they called Jesus: The Fish.<sup>16</sup>

Jesus/The Fish is here the opposite of the 'Uplifted' in 'St Matthew', of the Jesus later connected in *The Plumed Serpent* with love, spirit and will. His way to salvation is not up but down, as the fish's vital, non-frictional mode of relatedness is not above but below: 'Fish in the waters under the earth' (335). The way is the chthonian downflow later celebrated in *The Plumed Serpent* or *Mornings in Mexico*: 'the...falling back of the dark blood into the downward rhythm, the rhythm of pure forgetting and pure renewal,'<sup>17</sup> the downflow of oblivion, darkness, sleep and death:

like a fish, sinking down the dark  
reversion of night  
Like a fish seeking the bottom, Jesus. ...  
Face downwards  
( 'St Matthew', 321)

With Jesus's victory over death, the Fish changes into an archetypal symbol of rebirth, through a mystic reversal of opposites:



In the beginning  
 Jesus was called The Fish....  
 And in the end. (340)

Beautifully bracketed at the close of the poem between two lines referring to a cosmic reality situated beyond humanity, before or after, Jesus the Fish belongs to that mystic world where death is equated with birth, the down flow of the end with the primeval, life-giving waters of the beginning. So in myth, death is a second crossing of the waters, the amniotic fluid. The lake on whose edge the poem was written, the Zeller lake, does not only recall the lake where Jesus and his disciples went fishing; it also announces the mythical, mystical crossings of *The Plumed Serpent* and *Last Poems*. Reversing contained into container, the fish, the womb-like 'ark/Of the covenant' of 'Brother and Sister' (132) prefigures the slim black ship of Dionysos in 'Middle of the World' (688) and finally becomes 'the ship of death, your little ark' (718).

Lawrence's free verse, as Keith Sagar has so devastatingly shown, can be just like prose.<sup>18</sup> It is also, as Lawrence says in 'Poetry of the Present', 'direct utterance from the instant, whole man', (184) which does not mean naïve simplicity, but on the contrary complexity, artistry, flexibility of tone and manner. Sensuous empathy, descriptive naturalism, irony and wit blend into a symbolism that Lawrence takes pleasure in making ambiguous, as his fish is a truly protean, multiple symbol. Whereas Brooke's poem remains univocal, for Lawrence in the immediate present there is no perfection, no consummation, nothing finished. The strands are all flying, quivering, intermingling into the web' (182). Thus the poet's speaking voice, knowing 'no finished crystallisation' (182) of form or content (there are clues, flying strands, in the poem, but no conclusive meaning) is at once elliptic, elusive and ruminative. It is one and multiple, flowing like the Trent in *Sons and Lovers*: 'in a body ...intertwining among itself like some subtle, complex creature'.<sup>19</sup>

## NOTES

1. 'Review of *Georgian Poetry: 1911-12*', *Phoenix: the Posthumous Papers of D. H. Lawrence*, ed. E. D. McDonald (London: Heinemann, 1936), pp. 304-7.
2. D. H. Lawrence, 'Poetry of the Present', *The Complete Poems of D. H. Lawrence*, ed. V. de Sola Pinto and Warren Roberts (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977). All page references in the body of the text are to this edition.
3. See Christopher Hassall, *Rupert Brooke: a Biography* (London: Faber, 1964); John Lehmann, *Rupert Brooke: his Life and his Legend* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980); and my own doctoral thesis, *Le poète et ses masques: Rupert Brooke* (Presses Universitaires de Valenciennes, 1986).
4. Hassall, p. 284.
5. 'The Two Principles', *Phoenix II: Uncollected, Unpublished and other Prose Works by D. H. Lawrence*, ed. Warren Roberts and Harry T. Moore (London: Heinemann, 1968), p. 227.
6. 'The Two Principles', p. 230.
7. *Study of Thomas Hardy and other Essays*, ed. Bruce Steele (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 90.
8. 'Rhumbs', *Tel Quel II* (Paris: Pleiade), p. 637.
9. *The Plumed Serpent*, ed. L. D. Clark (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 146.
10. *Phoenix*, pp. 832 and 795.
11. *The Letters of D. H. Lawrence*. vol. 2, 1913-16 ed. George J. Zytaruk and James T. Boulton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 470.
12. *Sons and Lovers* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1948), p. 87; *Mr Noon*, ed. Lindeth Vasey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 290.
13. *The Plumed Serpent*, p. 412.
14. *The Plumed Serpent*, p. 422.
15. Keith Sagar, 'Introduction' to *The Princess and Other Stories* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971), p. 9.
16. *Phoenix*, p. 721.
17. *Mornings in Mexico* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1986), p. 56.
18. *D. H. Lawrence: Life into Art* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985), p. 204.