D.H. Lawrence (1885-1930)
SIX ANIMAL POEMS

by
Peter Cash

English Association Bookmarks
No. 80
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BIBLIOGRAPHY

OTHER BOOKS TO READ
ed. Donald Hall, A Choice of Whitman’s Verse, Faber 2002.


SCOPE OF TOPIC
The bibliography for this Bookmark (above) reveals that D. H. Lawrence did not invent the
genre of animal poetry – although it can sometimes seem as if he did. If anyone, the father
of English nature-writing is Gilbert White (1720-1793);* his immaculate prose – his journals
and especially his letters – pre-dates John Clare’s ungrammatical verse by fifty years and
looks forward actively to the journals and the poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889).

*Clare was born in the year that White died: 1793.

According to Richard Mabey, Gilbert White, a clergyman, “was perhaps the first writer to talk
of animals – and particularly birds – as if they conceivably inhabited the same universe as
human beings”. Read one of White’s letters – to naturalist Thomas Pennant or zoologist
Daines Barrington – and you will see that they are remarkable for his interest in and
sympathy for wild creatures: even though his vocabulary is not without the taint of
anthropomorphism, this – since White was essentially a factual observer – is not so much a
way of seeing the natural world as a historical accident of style. Come to Wordsworth’s,
Keats’ and Shelley’s poems about birds and you will find them far more anthropomorphic;
read their odes to cuckoos, nightingales and skylarks and you’ll see that the temptation to
appropriate these creatures to human causes has not been resisted. With the striking
exception of Clare, the Romantic poets dress birds in human clothes and value them only in
so far as their apparent characteristics suggest human virtues.

Lawrence’s forerunner, then, is Clare whose verse carries out a comprehensive survey of
English wild-life, both embracing it in scientific detail and dignifying it. Clare’s work and
Lawrence’s work differ, not in their objective and respectful studies of nature, but formally,
technically: whereas Clare organises his observations in iambic pentameter, Lawrence prefers
the prose rhythms of American humanist Walt Whitman (1819-1892). Even in his prose
fiction, Lawrence does not have Gilbert White’s command of grammar; in his poetry, he tries
to turn his irregular way with a sentence to his advantage. The result is something original in
English poetry, if not altogether successful ...

If rabbits run, fish glide and snakes slither, why shouldn’t verse too take on organic forms
and move accordingly, expressively? Why not? In 1935, the American critic R. P. Blackmur
counters this convenient argument. In an essay entitled *D. H. Lawrence and Expressive Form*, Blackmur argues that Lawrence’s poetry lacks “a rational structure which controls, orders and composes in external or objective form the material of which it is made” and he concludes that his subject-matter “fails to its own disadvantage to employ the formal devices of the art in which it is couched.” Lawrence, he declares, “simply did not care in his verse ... for anything beyond the immediate blueprint expression of what he had in mind.” In 1957, A. Alvarez (in *The Shaping Spirit*) comes to Lawrence’s defence in this way:

> “Lawrence’s controlling standard was delicacy: a constant, fluid awareness, nearer the checks of intimate talk than those of regular prosody. His poetry is not the outcome of rules and formal craftsmanship but of a purer, more native and immediate artistic sensibility. It is poetry because it could not be otherwise.”

‘A purer, more native and immediate artistic sensibility?’ What’s that supposed to be? Alvarez’s defence could not be feebler, for it relies upon an appeal to the lowest common denominator; his analysis is waffle because it could not be otherwise. For an endorsement of Blackmur’s original assessment, we can do little better than this:

> “He had all the poet’s equipment, but he entirely lacked the discipline that would have allowed him to make use of it. His poems are notes of image and idea that might be suitable for poetic expression, but in no case does he get further than the preliminary draft, the merest hint of what the poem might be ...”

**Anthony West, *D. H. Lawrence*, 1966.**

D. H. Lawrence wrote enough prose – both creative and critical – for us to know that he was nothing if not intellectually challenging: in writing verse without regard for the conventional controls of rhyme and metre, he knew that he was inviting critical opprobrium and scorn ... In many places, his verse deserves it, for there can be a tedium about his re-statements ‘of image and idea’, not least where his lines are unjustifiably wayward: either too short to repay attention or too long ever to grab hold of it. This Bookmark concentrates on six poems in which his language lifts its subject-matter to fresh heights and his line-length *is* expressive: in these cases, if not in others, his achievement *is* considerable and lasting. In his finest pieces, Lawrence brings to his descriptions of creatures a new way of writing that complements their graces and respects their idiosyncrasies. Although his line-lengths are erratic, he is never without a verbal plan: he is a resourceful recycler of metonyms, makes an art of the strategic deployment of adjectives and imports from his own prose a functional use of rhythm.

Already to this Bookmark series, John Wareham (No 41) has contributed a specific study of Lawrence’s *BIRDS, BEASTS and FLOWERS*: as well as about beasts, such as tortoise and snake, he writes about birds (*Humming-Bird*) and flowers (*Cypresses, Almond-Blossom* and *Cyclamens*). Cautiously, this Bookmark (No 80) attempts to cover some of the same ground: for the loss of birds and flowers, it tries to compensate with a kangaroo and a lion.

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**THE MOSQUITO** (1920)

> “And the jackals? Jackals were indeed less to Mr Sorley’s mind, but he admitted that the mercy of God, being infinite, may well embrace all mammals. And the wasps? He became uneasy during the descent to wasps and was apt to change the conversation. And oranges, cactuses, crystals and mud? and the bacteria inside Mr Sorley? No, no, this is going too far. We must exclude someone from our gathering or we shall be left with nothing.”

**E. M. Forster: *A Passage to India* (1924) Chapter 4**
In *The Mosquito*, there is a curious tension between the attention which Lawrence’s rhythms pay to ‘the mosquito’ and the contempt which his metonyms express for it, resulting in its ultimate exclusion ‘from the gathering’. The situation for the poem is a villa in Syracuse (Sicily) around which an insect is flying. Irritated by both its noise and its eagerness to bite him, Lawrence tries to swat it, but is at first frustrated by its aerial alacrity. As a consequence, this encounter turns into a contest between species. Who will win: ‘man or mosquito’?

In fragments of free verse, Lawrence talks to the insect, switching as he does so between the interrogative mood and the indicative mood. The purpose of this dynamic mood-movement is first to challenge the parasite to account for its troublesome existence –

> When did you start your tricks,  
> Monsieur?

> What do you stand on such high legs for?  
> Why this length of shredded shank,  
> You exaltation?

– and then to confirm to Lawrence’s own satisfaction that his tone of righteous indignation (in effect, “Who do you think you are, gnat?”) is justified. Four of the first five verses take the grammatical form of a question which, at the same time as they pay tribute to the insect’s agility, audacity and ingenuity, prepare us for the theological judgement that Lawrence proposes to pass upon it: namely, that it is nothing better/less than an agent of the Devil. At the same time as his alliterative cadences rhythmically enact the aerobatic aplomb of the gnat, Lawrence sneers at it:

> Queer, how you stalk and prowl the air  
> In circles and evasions, enveloping me,  
> Ghoul on wings  
> Winged Victory

His contempt for it (on its ‘high’ and mighty legs) becomes audible in his use of the eponym ‘Winged Victory’, a sarcastic reference to the Winged Victory of Samothrace, a marble statue of the Greek goddess Nike which, since 1884, has stood in the Louvre Museum in Paris. Accordingly, his first conclusion –

> Yet what an aura surrounds you;  
> Your evil little aura, prowling and casting a numbness on my mind.

> That is your trick, your bit of filthy magic:  
> Invisibility and the anaesthetic power  
> To deaden my attention in your direction

– commences with the conjunction ‘Yet’ in order to indicate that his presentation of the creature is about to take a decisive turn. Consistent with his earlier use of ‘devilry’, Lawrence proceeds to a vocabulary which condemns the mosquito for a diabolical kind of trickery: ‘evil little aura’, ‘bit of filthy magic’, then ‘ghoul on wings’, ‘cunningly conscious’, ‘sly game’, ‘hateful little trump’, ‘you pointed fiend’, ‘obscenely ecstasyed’ and ultimately ‘accursed hairy frailty’ – my italics here for an adjective which, when he writes *Snake*, will swap sides. Lawrence objects to its effrontery, its triumphalism: ‘a yell of triumph’ ... Characteristically, he is here throwing words at a creature in an effort to define it [as intolerable] and thereby put it in its place.

In Elizabethan thought, there was a Great Chain of Being: God – angels – men – animals – insects. Lawrence predicates his attack on the mosquito upon this theological belief that such
an insect is consequently inferior to him; relative to ‘man’, ‘mosquito’ has acquired a value [= a nuisance-value] way above its lowly place in the order of Creation. On this understanding, his first strategy in those four verses is to ask the pest what it thinks that it is doing, annoying him so. On the one hand, Lawrence’s metonyms – ‘Monsieur’, ‘you exaltation’, ‘you phantom’, ‘translucent phantom shred’, ‘streaky sorcerer’, ‘Winged Victory’ – express a grudging admiration for its craftiness; on the other, he resorts finally to language (‘I hate the way’, ‘small, high, hateful bugle’, ‘obscenity of trespass’) which emphasises that this entomological cunning is no joke.

One way of reading the poem is to regard it as a slanging match between terms of metonymy: ‘You exaltation’ v. ‘You pointed fiend’/ ‘you phantom’ v. ‘You speck’/ ‘Winged Victory’ v. ‘winged blood-drop’. Of course, the dramatic direction of the narrative is towards the second sort of metonym. The conclusion of the poem –

Can I not overtake you?
Are you not one too many for me,
Winged Victory?
Am I not mosquito enough to out-mosquito you?

Queer, what a big stain my sucked blood makes
Beside the infinitesimal faint smear of you!
Queer, what a dim dark smudge you have disappeared into!

– reverts poetically to the combination of interrogative and indicative statements with which it began. To stress that man is superior to mosquito, the verb ‘to out-mosquito’ makes its one and only appearance in English usage;* finally, syntactically parallel statements (‘Queer, what a …’) precede two alliterative metonyms – ‘infinitesimal faint smear’ and ‘dim dark smudge’ – in order to confirm what kind of come-upance awaits a creature which has the temerity to soar above its station. Contradicting Fish, this poem presumes vociferously that man is ‘the measure of creation’.

* In An Otter, Ted Hughes (1960) writes that the amphibious animal has the gift to ‘outfish fish’.

Further reading
D. H. Lawrence: Bat
D. H. Lawrence: Man and Bat

BABY TORTOISE (1920)

In BIRDS, BEASTS and FLOWERS, published in 1923, this ‘baby tortoise’ is the first of the eponymous beasts on which Lawrence trains his gaze. Baby Tortoise – one of six poems in this collection on the subject of tortoises – makes a delightful start to the zoological investigation that his poetry conducts and in addition illustrates the linguistic approach that it will take, circling around its subjects and seeing them from different stand-points. A. Alvarez (The Shaping Spirit, 1957) argues that, in his animal poems, Lawrence
doesn’t merely describe, nor does he go at his subjects with a preconceived idea and try to twist them into meanings they would not naturally take. They are neither all subject nor all poet. It is a matter of a vital and complex relationship between the two, difficult, fluent, inward and wholly unabstract.
Alvarez goes so far as to argue that Lawrence’s supreme concern with this ‘relationship’ is responsible for the formlessness of his poetry ... After a false start to his career as a poet, Lawrence stopped trying to write lines that both rhyme and scan; he gave up writing in recognisable verse-forms and chose instead to make poems from sentences of prose which he cuts into erratic line-lengths and irregular verse-paragraphs. According to Alvarez, he took this course not as a matter of easy convenience, but upon a principle: namely, that any attempt to circumscribe such a subject within a poetic form would represent an anthropomorphic attempt to impose his own ego upon it, an interpretation which it was not born to bear. For this fine reason, Lawrence’s verse must not allow itself any formal exactitude, must itself remain free to roam ...

As a result, Baby Tortoise consists of twenty-one fragments of free verse: in the space of its eighty lines, a fragment [= a verse] can be one line in length or eight lines in length; within these verses, a line can be one word in length or fourteen words in length. It is a piece of writing in which the poet is literally free [= from the constraints of rhyme and metre] to follow his line of thought and set out an idea. The idea on which Lawrence bases Baby Tortoise is the playful idea that this ‘baby tortoise’ is the first creature ever to have been born: from this premise, he proceeds to explain its subsequent behaviour. In the process, he expresses his contempt for the ‘vast inanimate’ world into which this ‘tiny, fragile, half-animate bean’ has been born alone and by implication praises its efforts to make its way across such an unresponsive planet/such inert terrain.

For John Lucas, introducing his Routledge selection of 1990, Alvarez’s ‘excellent’ argument is to be endorsed. Accordingly, he highlights Lawrence’s achievement in contradistinction to the feeble approaches of two of his successors in this genre, Theodore Roethke (1908-1963) and Ted Hughes (1930-1998) ...

For both of these, no matter how hard they [Roethke and Hughes] try wholly to attend, there is always the risk of designed meanings, the procrustean tug that distorts the recognition of true otherness. Their birds, plants and fish, that is, threaten to turn into metaphors. Not the thing in itself, but the thing as something else. With Lawrence this never happens.

Does it not ..? From the first few steps that the baby tortoise takes in the world, Lawrence charts its evolution. Quickly, it becomes plain that this baby beast has character: by means of repetitions, he emphasises how ‘tiny’ (x 6) and how ‘slow’ (x 7) and therefore how ill-equipped it is to make any kind of progress across such a vast, chaotic mass. For ‘pitching itself against the inertia’, it is badly designed – and yet this is the very creature required to make the first journey, the maiden voyage ...

Fortunately, the baby tortoise is endowed with some heroic qualities, not least among which is its ‘indomitable will’. For this reason, Lawrence finds for this noble mite a range of ironic, even oxymoronic epithets – ‘challenger’, ‘little Ulysses’, ‘fore-runner’, ‘little Titan’, ‘pioneer’, ‘Stoic, Ulyssian atom’, ‘traveller’, ‘invincible fore-runner’ – which enlarge its status to epic, mythological proportions; used in the vocative case, these urgent forms of metonymy – fourteen in total – are often given lines of their own. To ‘row against’ the ‘incalculable inertia’, Lawrence’s tortoise is literally ill-suited: under its carapace, it looks less like a Homeric hero with a ‘battle-shield’ and more ‘like a gentleman in a long-skirted coat’, carrying the weight of the world on his ‘shoulders’. Fortunately again, this ‘small bird’ (another metonym x 2) is helped no end in its bellicose enterprise by ‘the ponderous, preponderate, inanimate universe’ across which it can – relatively speaking – be said to be yomping at high speed.

The tortoise is a ‘tiny shell-bird’: with respect to its pioneering spirit, Lawrence – ‘Buon viaggio’ – wishes it well. From his single stand-point, it appears to him that this little beast is a brave adventurer, a survivor who deserves to be congratulated; his ‘pre-conceived idea’ is of an obdurate and uncomplaining creature, meek, but determined against all odds to inherit the earth. From the outset, Lawrence has designed a meaning for it: that is, he has turned it...
into a metaphor for brave endeavour: far from embracing its ‘true otherness’, he has turned ‘the thing’ [= the baby tortoise] into ‘something else’, something tamer and warmer.

Both Alvarez and Lucas contend that, in their depictions of animals, poets must not humanise them: with Lawrence, this does not always happen ... If it did, then he would content himself here with tributes to the tortoise's impersonal qualities: its hardiness, its sturdiness, its stamina. Instead, Baby Tortoise is not so much a study of nature as a comic sketch, its sympathies all with the stoical animal (the 'slow one') and its ironies all at the expense of an even slower world of matter ('some dim bit of herbage'). From the start, Lawrence's attitude to this 'small insect' has mixed admiration with amusement. For Alvarez's theory, endorsed by Lucas, this mixture spells trouble in that Lawrence, if he is to refrain from imposing a character on the tortoise and thereby justify his use of free verse, cannot afford to take up any attitude. If he were only an impersonal observer, letting his eye rove freely over the creature, studying it without any moral pre-conception, then a regard for bravery and obduracy, for meekness and incongruous determination – all human virtues which his vocabulary has bestowed upon it – would be nowhere in evidence.

*SNAKE (1920)*

"To break the lovely form of metrical verse and dish up the fragments as a new substance, called vers libre, this is what most of the free-verseyers accomplish. They do not know that free verse has its own nature ... It has no finish. It has no satisfying stability ... It is the instant; the quick.”

D. H. Lawrence, 1928.

"Free verse ... a cadenced form of writing, buttressed with repetitions, parallelisms and occasionally rhymes, derived at first hand from Whitman ...”


"The span of the lines is not that of the talking voice. The tone is: that is, it is direct and without self-consciousness.”


In this famous poem, Lawrence tells the story of his encounter with a Sicilian snake. In the course of this narrative, he develops an understanding that human and non-human creatures are equal citizens of the Earth: in Graham Hough's view, it is 'an attempt to put common human subjectivity in its place by showing the myriad of queer, separate, non-human existences around it'. Immediately, it is evident what radical progress Lawrence has made from the unenlightened position which he adopted in *The Mosquito*; whereas there he put a 'queer' and infuriating insect 'in its place', here 'common human subjectivity' [ie. his own preconceptions/prejudices] come in for that very same treatment.

Lawrence relates that, on a hot day in July, a snake came to the water-trough at his villa below Mount Etna (on the Italian island of Sicily) and that, before filling his pitcher, he ...

... must wait, must stand and wait, for there he was at the trough before me.

There is an undeniable sense in which Lawrence's free verse is a rhythmical prose; in this line, we can nevertheless hear 'the checks of intimate talk' (Alvarez) by which his use of line-length conveys his attitude to his subject. The iambics of 'must wait, must stand and wait' convey his exasperation; the intonation of 'for there he was' expresses his indignation. Together, these cadences prepare us for the reluctant reflection (one verse-paragraph later) that the snake is 'before' the man in more ways than one:
Someone was before me at my water-trough,  
And I, like a second-comer, waiting.

This 'someone' is 'before' him both literally and metaphorically: that is, it came to the Earth first and by the law of primogeniture has a right to take a moral precedence over him. Although Lawrence ('before me at my ...') may not like it, he feels obliged to admit that the snake (itself 'earth-brown, earth-golden') is entitled to occupy pride of place. In the great order of things, he – a mere man – is 'a second-comer'.

Lawrence's monologue grows directly out of his own experience and records a close, personal observation. Consequently, *Snake* is a descriptive poem. On three occasions, Lawrence suspends his narrative so that he can record an act of steady contemplation. First:

He reached down from a fissure in the earth-wall in the gloom  
*And* trailed his yellow-brown slackness soft-bellied down,  
over the edge of the stone trough,  
*And* rested his throat upon the stone bottom,  
*And* where the water had dripped from the tap, in a small clearness,  
He sipped with his straight mouth,  
Softly drank through his straight gums, into his slack long body,  
Silently.

Graham Hough (1956) explains that, in these verse-paragraphs, 'the mode of vision ... is represented by the arrangement of the lines on the page'. Consistently, this arrangement involves a series of simple sentences, co-ordinated into one complex sentence (here, no fewer than 65 words long) by means of the common conjunction 'and' (x 3). Both the line-lengths and the repetitions ('slackness'/slack', 'stone/stone', 'straight'/straight', even the sibilant adverbs) are skilful, separately recording each 'instant'; ultimately, they imply the pace of the snake's slithering movement and reproduce its hissing sound. For this unique form of locomotion, Lawrence eventually coins the verb 'to snake-ease' – as in 'snake-easing his shoulders'.

The poem is remarkable for the 'fluency' (Alvarez) with which Lawrence writes free verse. Critics queue up to endorse this opinion: 'perception is embodied in rhythms that are an essential part of the poem's meaning' (Vivian de Sola Pinto)/'observe the lovely fluidity of movement like that of the snake itself' (Graham Hough)/'one of the great poems where the form is the perfect incarnation of the content' (Keith Sagar). Second, the rhythms of the fifth verse-paragraph –

He lifted his head from his drinking, as cattle do,  
*And* looked at me vaguely, as drinking cattle do,  
*And* flickered his two-forked tongue from his lips, *and* mused a moment,  
*And* stooped *and* drank a little more ...

– enact the sinuous movement of the reptile with a mimetic precision. The single sentence is remarkable for the polysyndetic presentation of its every twist and turn: no fewer than five *ands* link together six actions/verbs. Most subtle is the changed inflection between the two subordinate clauses of manner, a modulation alert to the snake’s fluid motion by way of that grammatical/rhythmic variation of 'drinking'.

Of course, *Snake* is also a discursive poem. It consists of a dialogue between antiphonal voices. In the one ear, there is Lawrence’s growing admiration for the snake which his expansive descriptions express; in the other, there are the 'voices' of his 'human education' which instruct him that serpents are evil and 'venomous'. By his Christian teachers, Lawrence has been schooled in the traditional belief that the snake is responsible for Original Sin. Finding himself in a Mediterranean Eden, he can hear the 'voices' of his upbringing, exhorting
him to prove his manhood, ‘take a stick’ and kill the creature. ‘But’ conflicting with this indoctrination is Lawrence’s own sudden impulse: even as he observes it, he is conceiving for the snake a radically high regard. In Catholic Italy, he ‘must ... confess’ how much he has come to like the snake and ‘how glad’ he feels that it has come ‘like a guest in quiet’ to his water-trough; the simile reveals what an affable, comfortable and ‘peaceful’ accommodation they have come to. Lawrence is supposed to fear and loathe the yellow-brown reptile ... Confused by contrary indications, he engages in a question-and-answer session with himself:

Was it humility, to feel so honoured?
I felt so honoured.

And yet those voices:
If you were not afraid, you would kill him!

Nowhere is the tense dialogue between the conventional Christian and the liberal humanist more audible. His rhetorical question does not go unanswered; he confirms how humble and ‘honoured’ he feels in an earnest tone, effectively repeating that he is pleased to know his place. At once, ‘those voices’ admonish him. Too late! From this point onwards, it becomes clear that they can rebuke him/taunt him no more. Lawrence has an altered perception of the hierarchy in which man and animal exist: ‘afraid’ though he was, he was ‘honoured still more’ that the snake should seek his ‘hospitality’/visit his water-trough and so entreat his good fellowship.

When Lawrence’s study of the snake resumes, it does so with a new authority. Third, the functional movements of the free verse –

He drank enough
And lifted his head, dreamily, as one who has drunken,
And flickered his tongue like a forked night on the air, so black,
Seeming to lick his lips,
And looked around like a god, unseeing, into the air,
And slowly turned his head,
And slowly, very slowly, as if thrice a-dream,
Proceeded to draw his slow length curving round
And climb again the broken bank of my wall-face

– monitor the calm movements of the snake by means of a familiar grammar: by a polysyndetic use of six co-ordinate conjunctions, he charts and details its reflexes, faithfully capturing each ‘instant’. The Biblical cadences of the two similes (‘as one ...’/ ‘as if ...’) and the strategic repetitions of ‘slowly’ add to the divine air of self-possession with which it goes about its business – ‘the divine otherness of non-human life’ (De Sola Pinto, 1951). Lawrence conveys his reaction to its retreat also by rhythmical repetitions:

A sort of horror, a sort of protest against his withdrawing into that horrid black hole,
Deliberately going into the blackness, and slowly drawing himself after,
Overcame me now his back was turned.

Now that he has made common cause with the snake, he is horrified that it can withdraw into the hole in the wall of his Taormina garden. Lawrence’s adjectives (‘horrid black’) indicate that, compounding his sudden sense of loss, is his realisation that it is in effect returning to an infernal ‘underworld’: Hell. Given his feeling of kinship with the creature, he cannot bear this thought and finally shakes that stick at him: significantly, the snake ‘convulsed in undignified haste, writhed like lightning and was gone’.

Now that his narrative is over, Lawrence’s peroration can begin. No sooner has he caused the creature to act without dignity than he is regretting his action (‘immediately I regretted it’) and confirming that he has developed a fresh sensibility: according to Pinto, his
‘imaginative apprehension of the kinship of man to the lower animals is a contribution to the growth of human sensibility’. As a result, he engages in stern self-recrimination, piling up the adjectives (‘paltry’/’vulgar’/’mean’) against his illiberal attitude and his unsympathetic gesture:

I despised myself and the voices of my accursed human education.

In his final analysis, it is not the snake but the man himself who is loathed (‘despised’); it is his illiberal ‘human education’ which is ‘accursed’ for its ironic intolerance of all things bright and beautiful: eg. ‘earth-golden’. He starts to worry that, like Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner, he may have committed a sin against Nature and he fervently wishes that the snake would reappear: ‘I wished he would come back, my snake’. Here, the possessive adjective shows how much progress Lawrence has made; that epithet is one of several ‘checks of intimate talk’ by which the dynamic development of his affinity for the reptile is articulated. In the end, the balance between the species has tilted so far in the snake’s favour that it is ‘like a king, like a king in exile’ and ‘one of the lords of life’: in other words, it is neither an inferior nor even an equal citizen of the Earth to the poet, but ‘crowned’ above him. The measure of this revised relationship is that the man feels morally obliged to ‘expiate’/atone for his petty ‘act’ of lese majesté towards the animal. In this poem, it is not a man’s height, but a snake’s ‘slow length’ which is ‘the measure of creation’ (Fish).

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**FISH (1922)**

*Fish* is not a good poem: indeed, it is hardly ‘a poem’ at all – perhaps, in the end, being ‘a poem’ only because it can’t be anything else. *Fish* is writing in which line-length appears to be a component of the means of expression, but actually isn’t; instead, the ‘poem’ comprises bits of prose, its 172 lines ranging from laconic lines of one word to prolix lines of fourteen words. Unlike *Bat* and *Snake, Fish* does not pursue a single narrative; in *Fish*, Lawrence (who was also an artist) is writing as if he is painting a still life, but moving continually around his model, approaching it from different angles and perspectives. Accordingly, it amounts to a ramble around its subject in an effort first to cover those angles from which it can be comprehensively defined and finally to ratify Lawrence’s supreme intuition: that man is ‘not the measure of creation’.

In *Baby Tortoise*, Lawrence’s epithets/metonyms attributed human traits to the animal: it was perceived as a bold warrior, an intrepid explorer, not easily daunted by the challenges which it encountered on its global travels. Of course, it was neither of those things: it was a tortoise. For that reason, A. Alvarez’s argument – that Lawrence always presents us with ‘the thing in itself’ – fell; here, however, it can be resurrected, for Lawrence curbs his anthropomorphic tendencies and attempts faithfully present this ‘aqueous’ creature on its own terms. Although he may ultimately fail, he does try to do justice to the fishiness of a fish.

Lawrence begins with an open mind. His method of composition is not to catch the fish in a single flash of observation nor to encapsulate it in a single passage of intense description, but to proceed speculatively: that is, to rehearse a number of words in a variety of formulations, thereby to examine how well they capture the essence of ichthyological creation. In *Fish*, Lawrence’s aim is to present us with fish both in general (as a species) and in particular (in the shape of a pike); his aim is to show us fish-life literally in its element. His one and only conception of a fish (‘Fish, oh Fish, so little matters’) is of a creature observably marked by its utter indifference to everything except for the element [= ‘the waters’ x 12] in which it breathes and lives. Especially impressive to him is the condition of ‘oneness’ in which it exists, a cold and isolated condition in which it has emerged from the Herakleitan flux and in which it has remained to the exclusion of all others:
Your life a sluice of sensations along your sides,
A flush at the flails of your fins, down the whorl of your tail,
And water wetly on fire in the grates of your gills;
Fixed water-eyes.

Even snakes lie together.

But, oh fish, that rock in water,
You lie only with the waters;
One touch.
No fingers, no hands and feet, no lips;
No tender muzzles,
No wistful bellies,
No loins of desire,
None.

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

So lax and untidy is this writing that its disciplines need pointing out: first, that it confines itself strictly to empirical observations; second, that it recycles its theme in one varied phrase. Nothing distinguishes Lawrence's fish from his tortoise more clearly than his impersonal metonym ('that rock in water') and his refusal to apply personal adjectives ('tender', 'wistful') to its body-parts. Nothing is more characteristic of his method than his systematic repetitions of theme: that the fish is intimate 'only with the waters/only with 'the naked element'. The fish 'lies with the waters of his silent passion, womb-element' (Line 35); it is 'himself in the element' (Line 38); it is 'nothing more' than 'himself and the element' (Line 41); it is 'alone with the element' (Line 64). To convey the liveliness of this lone fish, Lawrence writes that it swims with a certain 'joie de vivre', imposing this construction on its vivacious 'curvetting', but with Gallic élan, thereby to signal a knowing lapse into the language of anthropomorphism and ironically foreground an expansion of his serious theme: that a fish, being a fish, acts only on instinct, doing everything that it does – including reproduce – 'without love'. It is therefore without success that Lawrence tries to imagine what it must be like

To breathe from the flood at the gills,
Fish-blood slowly running next to the flood, extracting fish-fire;
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
And merging oneself!

To be a fish!
So utterly without misgiving
To be a fish
In the waters.

For the sixth time in seventy lines, he imagines that the fish is in a naked embrace with the water as if it is lying with 'a lover'; for a second time, it is seen to be 'curvetting', but is doing so here with an audible 'click', an automatic and unemotional reflex-reaction – an image which reminds us that, although it may have been wriggling 'like a lover', it isn't 'a lover', but a fish.* Lawrence marvels not only at its remoteness from him, but also at its apparent exultation in its submerged existence. The exclamation-marks are there to express how elated this fish feels 'to be a fish': as he perceives it, this creature, far from expressing a human joy, rejoices in being a creature ... It makes no apology [= is utterly 'without
misgiving’) for being ‘a fish in the waters’; it celebrates being exactly what it is. From his human perspective, he can only stare in awe at its perfect self-possession. *For a fish, ‘curvetting’ is a strange thing to be doing in that ‘curvet’ is a verb which, technically, applies to a leaping horse.

Keith Sagar (1966) argues that D. H. Lawrence had ‘an almost occult penetration into the being of other creatures’. Whilst this may be an obvious way to praise Lawrence’s achievement in his animal poetry, it is not what Lawrence achieves – nor indeed what he himself claims to achieve. As a warm-blooded mammal, a hot-blooded human, he cannot comprehend what it means to be a cold-blooded fish living ‘without love’: although ‘they swarm in companies’ and ‘drive in shoals’, fish remain ‘out of contact’ with one another and do not touch, ‘a magnetism in the water between them only’. Lawrence writes *Fish to acknowledge this incomprehensible/unfathomable difference.

The situation is a trip by rowing-boat across Lake Zell, an inland lake in the district of Zell-am-See near Salzburg in Austria. ‘Sitting in a boat on the Zeller lake’, Lawrence is ‘watching the fishes in the breathing waters’ – at which point, rather than appropriate or recruit them to his human way of seeing things, he succumbs to bewilderment and asks himself in italics: “*who are these?*” Significantly, he sets eyes on ‘a slim young pike’ which at first glance is said to be wearing a ‘grey-striped suit’ and which then slouches away ‘like a lout on an obscure pavement’. At once, there follow lines which explicitly reject this anthropomorphic imagery:

But watching closer
That motionless deadly motion,
That unnatural barrel body, that long ghoul nose ...
I left off hailing him.

I had made a mistake, I didn’t know him,
This grey, monotonous soul in the water,
This intense individual in shadow,
Fish-alive.

I didn’t know his God,
I didn’t know his God.

Which is perhaps the last admission which life has to wring out of us.

Lawrence’s reformulations of phrase have an unintended consequence: rather than come to terms with the true nature of the fish, he finds himself further removed from it, confounded and perplexed. The fish keeps slithering out of his grasp, as it were. Casually though this passage commences, that conjunction (‘But watching closer …’) marks a re-direction of his argument: ‘watching closer’, he sees how inappropriate all human comparisons are and opts instead for more impersonal, less subjective metaphors: ‘barrel body’, ‘ghoul nose’. Above all, he shows some humility (‘I had made a mistake’) and admits that – to contradict Keith Sagar – he cannot see ‘into the being of other creatures’. He dispenses with the notion that he belongs to a superior species and thereby occupies a perfect position from which to ‘know’ and judge all others. On the contrary, he confesses his ignorance (‘I didn’t know him’) and concludes humbly that ichthyological creation is beyond his understanding. Line 115 is worth quoting, not merely because its 14 words/17 syllables serve literally to illustrate the extent to which Lawrence’s verse is prose, but also because it comes reluctantly to the radical conclusion that the ultimate form of wisdom [= ‘the last admission’] is ignorance.

If Lawrence had been an assiduous reviser of his work, concerned to write more traditionally, then he could have crafted the final movement of *Fish* [Lines 130–172] into a self-contained poem of some power.* The situation for this movement is an earlier encounter with a pike, perhaps on an English river-bank, an episode which seems already to have been instructive in that it too exemplified for him the virtue of humility – a word which he uses in *Snake* and which informs the conclusion that he is determined to emphasise here. He uses this encounter to corroborate his assertion that ‘*there are limits*’ to his comprehension of non-
human creatures: in particular, that fish are beyond ‘the pale’ of his human understanding ('They are beyond me, are fishes'). Only hereabouts [Lines 130 –141] does Fish move with the rhetorical force and rhythmical grace by which Snake and Mountain Lion are exalted. Lawrence tells us that he once went fishing

And suddenly pulled a gold-and-greenish, lucent fish from below,
And had him fly like a halo round my head,
Lunging in the air on the line.

Unhooked his gorging, water-horny mouth
And seen his horror-tilted eye,
His red-gold, water-precious, mirror-flat bright eye;
And felt him beat in my hand, with his mucous, leaping life-throb.

And my heart accused itself
Thinking: I am not the measure of creation.
This is beyond me, this fish.
His God stands outside my God.

Lawrence narrates this episode as if he is bearing witness to a divine revelation: first, there is that simile ('like a halo') which implies that God is present in all 'creation'; then, there are the compound adjectives ('water-horny', 'horror-tilted') coined to individuate the creature and confirm its essential uniqueness in that 'creation'; and finally, there is the statement of the creed by which he proposes to live, respecting – as De Sola Pinto puts it – ‘the divine otherness of non-human life’. In short, he knows his place. *Discord in Childhood and Piano are early poems in which Lawrence does try to write conventionally, but without complete success.

Compared to fish, man, ‘a many-fingered horror of daylight’, is an inferior creature. At this juncture, we can hear the same accents of self-reproach that characterise Lawrence's monologue in Snake: when the creature 'outstarts' him, the man retaliates, seeking to assert his mastery over it, but by that very same token diminishing himself and landing himself with the remorse that comes after committing a mean act: 'And I ... have made him die'. Immediately, we might conclude that Lawrence is reproaching himself for having failed to respect the fish's equal right to life, but such a conclusion would be premature: when we read on, we realise that, in Lawrence’s theological hierarchy, 'fishes', far from being equal citizens of the earth, belong to an élite. Fish, flesh and fowl ... Man and beast ... According to this theology, man (to borrow the language of Snake) is ‘a second-comer’, a second class citizen of the planet. Here, after all, is one that God made earlier:*

Fishes,
With their gold, red eyes, and green-pure-gleam, and under-gold,
And their pre-world loneliness,
And more-than-loveliness,
And white meat;
They move in other circles.

Outsiders.
Water-wayfarers.
Things of one element.
Aqueous,
Each by itself.

Both literally and morally, ‘fishes ... move in other circles’ and thereby acquire an integrity that man can only admire and revere. Such ancient and independent creatures attract their own epithets, each one (eg. 'water-wayfarers') proudly endorsing the special place of its species in God’s Creation.
*Fish* (pun intended) is a poem that tails off: two three-line verses (without either rhythmical energy or verbal flair) reiterate that ‘fishes’ are beyond Lawrence’s humble ken and then – by way of an explanation for this humility – remind us that Christians have used the symbol of a fish [= the ichthys] since the 1st Century AD. Why? In Greek, the noun ‘ichthys’ means ‘fish’, but the letters are also the initials of five Greek words which mean “Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour” [= *Iesous Christos Theou Yios Soter*]. In *Matthew* Chapter IV Verse 19, Jesus tells His Disciples: “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.”

**Further reading**
Elizabeth Bishop: *The Fish* (1946)
Ted Hughes: *Pike* (1960)

**KANGAROO** (1922)

Before very long, readers coming to *BIRDS, BEASTS and FLOWERS* will realise that Lawrence has embarked upon a project. Between 1919 and his death in 1930, Lawrence (together with his German wife, Frieda) travelled the world and seems to have set himself the task of writing about every bird and beast that he encounters in the different countries of his three visited continents. Literally, his ambition seems to be to write a poem about every creature under the ‘dark sun’: humming-bird, mosquito, turkey, tortoise, snake, ass, fish, bat, goat, elephant, kangaroo, eagle, jay, wolf, dog, lion. It is by no means insignificant that, at the end of each poem, he cites the location of its composition, for he wishes to indicate that his zoological inquiry has a global reach.

In 1922, Lawrence’s grand tour arrived in Western Australia. By the time that he reached Sydney, on the opposite side of the continent, he had had time to take in its vast outback, noticing that there existed among its wild creatures a singular exception to the general rule of animal life. From his new perspective in the southern hemisphere, he can see that most animals ‘in the northern hemisphere’ tend either to ‘leap’ upwards or to ‘rush’ onwards: that is, ‘rush horizontal’ towards their ends ‘like bulls’ at a gate. In the northern hemisphere, all creatures great seem suddenly a bit frantic: there, only creatures small – ‘only mice, and moles, and rats, and badgers, and beavers’ – ‘seem belly-plumbed to the earth’s mid-navel’; there, only ‘the cold-blooded frogs’ seem blessed with the capacity to embrace air and earth alike. Here, by contrast, he has noted that there is a large animal – the kangaroo – which can do both; what’s more, it can do both with aplomb, for its behaviour represents the diametric opposite of the way in which creatures ‘in the northern hemisphere’ behave: not only looking up, but also looking gravely down. In Lawrence’s imaginative estimation, the kangaroo is unique in that it can reconcile its urge to leap into the air with its umbilical connection to the earth. Even in Australia, animals are literally inclined to ‘rush’ headlong or ‘slip’ sidelong towards their respective horizons

But the yellow antipodal Kangaroo, when she sits up
Who can unseat her, like a liquid drop that is heavy, and just touches earth?

The kangaroo has a pose that enables her to sit comfortably between heaven and earth: being ‘antipodal’, she is naturally acclimatised to the force of gravity and able to accept its pull. Lawrence attributes the animal’s flair for omphaloskepsis to its born affinity with ‘some otherworld primaeval-dumb’ (*Humming-Bird*); in his ecology, in his mythology, it owes its primacy among creatures to its congenital link to ‘pre-world loneliness’ (*Fish*) – for which the Australian outback supplies an obvious and powerful metaphor, if not a literal parallel. Not for the first time, a beast has come under Lawrence’s scrutiny and gone away revered for being ‘a first-comer’.
Kangaroo becomes a love poem to the animal, a hymn to the creature (of 50 lines) that celebrates its innate ability to balance forces. Dominant among the features of the female kangaroo are her up-turned face and her low-slung pouch:

Delicate mother Kangaroo
Sitting up there rabbit-wise, but huge, plumb-weighted,
And lifting her beautiful slender face, oh! so much more gently
and finely-lined than rabbit’s, or than a hare’s,
Lifting her face to nibble at a round white peppermint drop,
which she loves, sensitive mother Kangaroo.

Her sensitive, long, pure-bred face.
Her full antipodal eyes, so dark,
So big and quiet and remote, having watched so many empty dawns in silent Australia.

Delicacy and sensitivity were not previously the first and foremost qualities to be associated with wide-eyed marsupials ... But they are now, for Lawrence’s Whitmanesque way of writing is ideally suited to setting out the physical impressions that the kangaroo keeps making on him. Lawrence takes a sheer delight in the process of describing this unusual beast. Such free-ranging writing – repeated adjectives, recurring cadences and reformulated phrases – enables him accurately to chart his stream of consciousness and thereby give a sympathetic description of the creature’s graces: at the same time as she is ‘plumbed’ (as if by lead piping) to the centre of the earth, she is ‘sitting up’ and ‘lifting her face’ ...

In his introduction of 1967, James Reeves agrees with Anthony West that none of Lawrence’s ‘notes of image and idea’ is more than a ‘preliminary draft’ of a poem. Of Kangaroo, if not of Fish, this is a harsh judgement.* Lawrence may not aim at compression, but does seek to circumscribe each creature by other means. He writes without economy, but not without organisation: indeed, the more skilfully he organises his writing, the more difficult it becomes to illustrate his skill by means of compact quotation. In Line 9, his compound adjective ‘belly-plumbed’ prepares us for his confirmation in Line 17 that the kangaroo is ‘plumb-weighted’, but also anticipates no fewer than five reiterations of this central idea in Lines 24, 26, 27, 34 and 50. Habitually, Lawrence’s free verse, rather than being altogether unstructured, is (exactly as Kenneth Allott observed) ‘buttressed with repetitions’ and ‘parallelisms’. For another instance, we shall see that the adjective ‘sensitive’ (first used as a variant of ‘delicate’ in Line 20 and instantly repeated in Line 21) is then recycled as an adverb in Line 30:

So she wistfully, sensitively sniffs the air, and then turns, goes off in slow sad leaps
On the long flat skis of her legs,
Steered and propelled by that steel-strong snake of a tail.

Whilst Lawrence’s gratuitous metonyms for the kangaroo’s tail (a ‘great muscular python-stretch’) and her legs (‘long flat skis’) may immediately catch the eye, his architectural design, though less conspicuous, remains under construction, buttresses and all. The architecture is of an echo-chamber ... Having finished with one adverb, he moves on to another, eight lines later re-tuning ‘wistfully’ to an abstract noun:

Still she watches with eternal, cocked wistfulness!
How full her eyes are, like the full, fathomless shining eyes of an Australian black boy
Who has been lost so many centuries on the margins of existence.

She watches with insatiable wistfulness.
Untold centuries of watching for something to come,
For a new signal from life, in that silent lost land of the South.
His choice of this word (used for a fourth time as ‘wistfully’ on Line 47) is central to his concept of the creature, not least because it would seem that its ‘wistfulness’ – being ‘eternal, cocked’ and ‘insatiable’ – is not a look of regret, not an expression of lost hope, but on the contrary a stance of enduring and undying optimism. Anthropomorphic though the word is, it implies that this ‘mother kangaroo’ is nowhere near starting to suspect that her ‘watching’ may be in vain ... Far from it, for ‘empty dawns’ do not daunt her, do not dispirit her: with her joey ensconced in her pouch, she ‘still’ looks indefatigably to the future, her patience hardly tested, her state of expectation still high. Her eyes remain ‘full’ [= full of hope?] and appear akin to ‘the full, fathomless and shining eyes of an Australian black boy’: by another name, an aborigine. The implication is that the kangaroo continues to eke out an aboriginal existence. As such a beast, it belongs to an epoch before the origins of civilisation and possesses a staying power which, while it may not be beyond all human understanding, lies certainly outside any European compass. *It is also a harsh judgement of The Mosquito and Snake.

In the Australian outback, Lawrence has identified a different and superior order of existence in which mortal creatures continue to enjoy a primaeval relationship with gravity: that is, still live in equilibrium with ‘the earth’s deep, heavy centre’. In his conclusion, he looks to a geological time-scale – long before the dawns of any civilisations – in order to authenticate and endorse his estimation of zoological creation, commending the kangaroo in particular for the vast length of time (‘so many empty dawns’, ‘so many centuries’, ‘untold centuries’) that it has managed to prosper ‘in silent Australia’/‘in that silent lost land of the South’. In one sense, the kangaroo – by its attunement to its aboriginal environment – both vindicates and verifies Lawrence’s entire vision.

* * * * * *

MOUNTAIN LION (1923)

And my heart accused itself
Thinking: I am not the measure of creation.
This is beyond me, this fish.
His God stands outside my God.
D. H. Lawrence: Fish (1923)

In this first-person narrative, D. H. Lawrence’s aim is to protest for the rights of an animal: in this poem, he registers a protest on behalf of a mountain lion. His simple thesis is that man is ‘not the measure of creation’; contrary to arrogant assumption and popular belief, he argues that man and animal are equal citizens of the earth.

Lawrence’s poem dramatises an encounter that took place between two Mexicans and himself in the Lobo Canyon. Lawrence’s free verse monitors his stream of consciousness; his rhythms chart the flow of his growing awareness that the two gunmen trudging towards him through the January snow (‘Men! The only animal in the world to fear!’) are carrying a mountain lion which they have just shot. Only gradually does ‘something yellow’ come into focus; only slowly does he become conscious that the gentle stranger (who ‘smiles, foolishly, as if he were caught doing wrong’) has killed a cougar:

It is a mountain lion,
A long, long slim cat, yellow like a lioness.
Dead.
He trapped her this morning, he says, smiling foolishly.

Lawrence organises his free verse so that the drawn-out description of the lion is brought hard up against the monosyllabic ‘dead’ which – in order to emphasise both the lion’s...
deadness and the Mexican’s foolishness – he has strategically placed upon a line of its own. The bandit’s smile, then, is a measure of man’s inanity in killing such a magnificent creature. More than man’s inhumanity to man, man’s inhumaneness to animal reveals his inability to appreciate that he is not ‘the measure of creation’. It is this crass failure to see himself in a cosmic perspective that Lawrence’s adjectives then mock mercilessly:

Lift up her face,
Her round, bright face, bright as frost.
Her round, fine-fashioned head, with two dead ears;
And stripes in the brilliant frost of her face, sharp, fine dark rays,
Dark, keen, fine eyes in the brilliant frost of her face.
Beautiful dead eyes.

He marshals into activity seven positive adjectives (five of them simple monosyllables) in order to suggest the ferocious vivacity of this animal. Systematically, he repeats ‘round’, ‘bright’, ‘fine’ and ‘brilliant’ in order to convey her vibrant life-force, but – again – strategically punctuates this stream of vibrant terms with the negative adjective ‘dead’ in order to stress that some man has gone out of his way to staunch it. It is by the cumulative force of his positive adjectives that Lawrence evokes the life-force of the animal; just, though, as this life-force seems about to overwhelm us, he cruelly cuts into his sentence with his reminder that she is ‘dead’. His tactic, then, is to generate a tension between the adjectives of immense vitality and that somnolent syllable ‘dead’; his aim is to leave us with the strong impression that the mountain lion (“Hermoso est!”) is simply too beautiful to be dead.

It is ironic that the Mexican’s exclamation “Hermoso est!” should recognise the ‘brilliant’ beauty of the creature which he has slaughtered. “Why, then, did you kill her?” we feel moved to retort, thereby echoing Lawrence’s shout of angry disapproval and – as intended – taking an active part in the poem.

Lawrence makes the ‘perilous ascent’ to the cougar’s lair in order to convey his sense of loss. Only from this vantage-point can he accurately assess what has been lost: no longer – he reflects – is this world a place in which ‘her bright striped frost-face’ will again watch ‘out of the shadow of the cave in the blood-orange rock’. Once more, the energy of his language is successful in creating a powerful feeling that the cougar and its precise experiences add to the sum of Creation. He surveys the ‘empty’ panorama below the Sangre de Cristo Mountains and comes to two conclusions: not only that the planet is big enough for both man and lion, but also – more radically – that Creation is more diminished by the loss of this one mountain lion than it would have been by the loss of ‘a million or two of humans’. Since – by this stage of the poem – mountain lions are some way ahead of gun-toting men on ethical points, we may feel inclined to agree with him. If we are finally persuaded that animals are morally superior to men, then it will be because Lawrence – by his animated language – has made us fully aware of the ‘gap in the world’ left by ‘the missing white frost-face of that slim yellow mountain lion!’

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