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FIVE POETS OF THE PRESENT ON D. H. LAWRENCE

SARAH CORBETT, JOHN McAULIFFE, DERYN REES-JONES,
NEIL ROLLINSON AND JEFFREY WAINWRIGHT

Curated by Howard J. Booth

Lawrence's poems demand our attention just as they arise from the poet attending to the world around him. The pieces that follow feature a number of poets pausing to respond to a Lawrence poem. In a small way they add to the story of how later writers have reacted to Lawrence's verse. He still often sounds like our contemporary in his handling of the lyric voice. Of how many modernist poets can that be said? I'll leave that question hanging, and go straight on to say that the brief for our poets of the present was a simple one: to take a poem and discuss what they noticed from their perspective as practitioners. Their diverse responses share a concern with how Lawrence's use of language and form helped him explore the individual's relationship with the world. We hope these brief pieces will leave readers wanting to return to these and other Lawrence poems, and to engage with the work of these fine poets of today for whom he remains an interlocutor.

NEIL ROLLINSON ON 'FISH'

(Poems 289–94)

When I first read 'Fish', I was stunned. As a young reader just developing my interest in poetry, I hadn't read anything like this before; so direct, so full of striking imagery – but also, more compellingly, the speaker of the poem was so emphatic, so much part of the poem, so strident, and full of passionate intensity. I

wasn't used to that. The poetry I'd come across hitherto consisted of well-mannered observations of life or landscape; calm and dispassionate. Here, suddenly, was a poet so engaging, and engaged in his subject, it excited me. It was a new experience.

Linguistically it was the intensity of his imagery that wowed me. I was struck by his down-to-earth diction too, a diction that was "unpoetic" to my ear. It seemed, to me, to be written by one of my own kind, in a language I was used to hearing at home, in a working-class family in Leeds. When this was mixed up with Lawrence's highly visual and tactile metaphors it was a relish to the senses.

His fish were "Curvetting bits of tin in the evening light"; that gloriously colloquial "bits of tin" was precisely what endeared me to him, it was refreshing and I could relate to it in a way that I hadn't been able to before. His description of a pike delighted me with its bold, surprising metaphors – "slim young" in a "grey-striped suit ... / Slouching ... / Like a lout on an obscure pavement" – it was both acutely accurate and funny. "Unhooked his gorging, water-horny mouth", the poet writes as he lands the fish, and I was stunned that you could use such a colloquial verb as "gorging" in a poem. This was my language; this wasn't T. S. Eliot, or Shakespeare. This was how they spoke in Yorkshire, in Nottinghamshire.

There was something else though, that struck me, and I found it everywhere I looked in Lawrence, and that was the notion of man as defiler, an intruder in this natural world:

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

I felt him also to be deeply atheistic: though his poem is littered with religious imagery, he speaks of God many times, of the fish being a god, among other gods. I realised later that if Lawrence can be said to be religious at all, then his is a kind of older, more archaic religion, Dionysian in tone, instinctual, brutal, but beautiful:

... I am not the measure of creation.

This is beyond me, this fish.

His God stands outside my God. (Lawrence's emphasis)

I found this liberating as a young teenager brought up in the suffocating world of Methodism. This was two fingers up to everything that the establishment held dear, and I was hooked. He curiously ends the poem with a reference to Jesus being "called The Fish", which I couldn't understand at the time, but my feeling now is that this is Lawrence appealing to the innocent, instinctual side of Christ that certainly he would have been sympathetic to, in contrast to the behemoth of organised religion, which he despised.

Neil Rollinson is the author of four collections of poetry, all published by Jonathan Cape. A previous winner of the National Poetry Competition, he is the recipient of several writers' awards, including most recently a Cholmondeley Award. His most recent collection *Talking Dead* was shortlisted for the Costa Poetry Award. He is currently a lecturer in creative writing at Bath Spa University. Website: <www.neilrollinson.com>.

SARAH CORBETT ON 'FIG'
(*Poems 232–5*)

When we think of D. H. Lawrence we think of sex, of censorship, and of being shocked (well, perhaps we are no longer *shocked*). But the poem 'Fig' still affronts – both the senses and the sensibilities – and no longer in the ways Lawrence intended. It is at once a love song to the female sexual and reproductive organs, a two-fingered (in both senses) salute to social conventions, a compendium of the symbolism of the fig, and a somewhat confused reaction to the emergence of female sexual and political emancipation.

The poem begins promisingly, shifting quickly from “The proper way to eat a fig, in society”, to a luscious, lascivious linguistic relishing (or ravishing) as the fruit is opened, “a glittering, rosy, moist, honied, heavy-petalled four-petalled flower”, until, in a triumphant de-flowering, “you have taken off the blossom with your lips”. The reader is left in no doubt at what has taken place. Lawrence is to be applauded, still, for his loving celebration of the cunt and of the act of cunnilingus.¹

But then the problems begin. It is clear that the speaker in the poem is male and is addressing a male reader – “you” – and that the object for discussion is female: “The fissure, the yoni, / The wonderful moist conductivity towards the centre”. Despite the gorgeous suggestive power of that last phrase, we also have the old, destroying, patriarchal dualism: woman is inward, turned towards her womb-centre, while man is “standing growing ... symbolic”. Furthermore, the fig is:

¹ I use “cunt” in the spirit of feminist reclamation, and because it remains, once its negative echoes are shouted away, the most resonant of words to conjure up the entirety of what we are forced otherwise to name, somewhat clumsily, “the female sexual organs”.

Involved,
Inturned,
The flowering all inward and womb-fibrilled;
And but one orifice.

As a symbol for female-ness this is problematic to say the least. Women have fought long and hard not to be defined – intellectually, psychologically, socially, politically, sexually – by their wombs.

It gets worse. The fig/cunt/womb is “Folded upon itself, and secret unutterable, / ... Sap that smells strange on your fingers, that even goats won’t taste it”. Lawrence falls prey to the very social approbation against female sexuality and distaste for the female parts that he is attempting to overturn. The poem goes on to equate the positive values of the fig/womb with reproductive productivity, “flowering and fertilisation, and fruiting”, and the negative values with what can only read as menstruation:

That’s how the fig dies, showing her crimson through the purple
slit
Like a wound ...

That’s how women die too.

Then the poem delivers the killing blow:

What then, when women the world over have all bursten into
self-assertion?
And bursten figs won’t keep?

And you do have to wonder what Lawrence was up to suggesting that a woman with a voice, an assertive woman, can lead only to rottenness and death. Better then to remain like the fig, “fruit of the female mystery, covert and inward”.

But (and there is a but) the central conceit of the poem shows how alert Lawrence was to the strange and special nature of the fig: it flowers inside the fruitlets, and must be pollinated by a *female* fig wasp. We might, then, choose to read in the poem – whether Lawrence intended us to or not – the unique power of female sexuality. Furthermore, the fig is now known to play a significant role in the reforestation of devastated land; it is one of the first plants to return and bring the land back to life. The fig, therefore, can be reclaimed as a symbol, not of female sexual passivity, but of female creative agency.

Sarah Corbett teaches Creative Writing for Lancaster University. In 2015 her fourth book, the verse-novel *And She Was*, was published by Pavilion Poetry/Liverpool University Press, who will also publish her new collection of poems in 2018: <<http://liverpooluniversitypress.co.uk/products/59801>>. She has three previous collections with Seren books: *Other Beasts* (2008), *The Witch Bag* (2002) and *The Red Wardrobe* (1998), shortlisted for the Forward Best First Collection Prize and the T. S. Eliot Prize.

JEFFREY WAINWRIGHT ON ‘SNAKE’

(*Poems* 303–5)

I have heard tell of people who seek out snakes, even inviting being bitten for the hallucinatory experience and to demonstrate the will to survive their venom. Most of us though do what Lawrence does in his poem: stop short. An encounter with a snake is almost always accidental and unexpected, an abrupt interruption. The bald arrest of Lawrence’s title – it’s almost a warning – catches this.

There are at least two sets of reasons why an encounter with a snake is minatory and both are treated in Lawrence’s poem. The first is our simple alienation from the kind of creature it is. Its

physical body seems particularly strange and disconcerting to us, trailing “his yellow-brown slackness soft-bellied down”, sipping

... with his straight mouth,
... through his straight gums, into his slack long body,
Silently.

The serpent’s physical presence is brilliantly evoked here not only in the sibilance but the sensuousness of Lawrence’s long lines and such details as the word-ordering of “slack long” as opposed to the more expected “long slack”. “[A]s if thrice adream”, the snake’s movement is languorous “as he slowly drew up, snake-easing his shoulders”, contrasts disconcertingly with its ability to move extremely fast, “convulsed ... / Writhed like lightning”.

The second set of reasons has to do with what Lawrence calls the “voice of my education” which includes both rationality – “black snakes are innocent, the gold are venomous” – and the religious and mythological identifications of the snake with catastrophic damage, in Genesis and in the bite that takes Eurydice into the underworld. Lawrence’s choice of the word “innocent” points to this religious dimension as does the antiquated biblical phrase, “as one who has drunken”, and the concluding notion of “something to expiate”. The main action of the poem is the poet’s ignominious failure to defeat the “voices” of conventional wisdom. This confrontation of nature and culture is also carried in the implied opposition of England and the “Sicilian July” established immediately by those un-English daytime pyjamas. The form of the poem too, free verse mixing very short lines with Whitmanian expansiveness, is challengingly modern for its publication date in 1921. Lawrence’s contribution to the development of modernist poetic practice is too often ignored.

So the poem ends penitentially with the poet regretting his failure to recognise nature as against culture. The snake should not have been clumsily, if half-heartedly, assaulted but honoured as a “guest”. But is this the whole story of “my accursed human

education”? Is not the innocence of Nature also an idea from that education, existing in such emblems as Coleridge’s albatross in ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ to which Lawrence compares the snake? At least as powerful an image in the poem is Lawrence’s vision of the realm from which the snake has come and to which it returns: “the burning bowels of the earth”, “the dark door of the secret earth”, “that dreadful hole”, “that horrid black hole, / Deliberately going into the blackness”. Lawrence is fascinated by this volcanic dark which must be redolent of Pluto’s kingdom and therefore death, the only thing we certainly share with non-human nature. The snake cannot in fact become “my snake” any more than the poet could be a “guest” in its dark realm. He is willing a relationship which is impossible for the otherness of Nature’s unfathomable blackness is too different. In Emily Dickinson’s phrase, “Nature is a stranger yet”.²

Jeffrey Wainwright has published six volumes of poetry with Carcanet Press, most recently *What Must Happen* (2016). He is also the author of *Poetry: The Basics*, 3rd edition (Routledge, 2016) and *Acceptable Words: Essays on the Poetry of Geoffrey Hill* (Manchester UP, 2005). He lives in Manchester where he was Professor of English at Manchester Metropolitan University. Website: <www.jeffreywainwright.co.uk>.

² Emily Dickinson, ‘What mystery pervades a well!’, in *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Boston: Little Brown: 1960), 1400.

JOHN McAULIFFE ON 'BAVARIAN GENTIANS [1]'
(*Poems* 610–11)

The great Greek poet George Seferis was drawn, in his poems, to moments of extinction and last thoughts. His translation of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* in 1936 is evidence of one influential encounter with English-language poetry on this subject, a translation project undertaken after he spent time as a diplomat in London in the early 1930s. Less often discussed is Seferis's reading of D. H. Lawrence around that time, which resulted in his translation of Lawrence's 'The Ship of Death' being published in 1939.

It is easy to see why Lawrence's images of ships and underworld rituals appealed to Seferis, and this also suggests the possible impact of another late Lawrence poem on the Greek poet's work. Seferis's 1937 poem, 'Mathios Paskalis Among the Roses', imagines a man on the verge of death: "I've been smoking steadily all morning", Seferis's poem begins, in Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard's translation:³

if I stop the roses will embrace me
they'll choke me with thorns and fallen petals
they grow crookedly

Later in the poem, Seferis's ominous roses are all that the speaker can bring with him as he descends underground, the roses which compel memory:

I go down the steps smoking still,
and the roses follow me down excited
and in their manner there's something of that voice

³ George Seferis, 'Mathios Paskalis Among the Roses', in *Collected Poems*, trans., ed. and intro. by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard (London: Anvil Press, 1991), 105–6.

at the root of a cry, there where one starts shouting
 ‘mother’ or ‘help’
 or the small white cries of love.

It’s a small white garden full of roses
 a few square yards descending with me
 as I go down the steps, without the sky

Readers of Lawrence’s ‘Bavarian Gentians [1]’ will see Frieda in Lawrence’s poem’s title, and will see pride in his opening line: “Not every man has gentians in his house”, but as in Seferis’s poem, the speaker’s attachment to the things of this world is acknowledged but not exactly celebrated. The Greek underworld in which Lawrence sets his Bavarian flowers “shed[s] darkness on”, and is somehow illuminated by Seferis’s poem. Lawrence’s smoky netherworld is lit by flowers which are:

... big and dark, only dark
 darkening the day-time, torch-like, with the smoking blueness of
 Pluto’s gloom,
 ribbed and torch-like ...

If they are of this world, they are also assuredly most useful as harbingers of the next world.

The astonishing crux of Lawrence’s poem is in the odd locution: “Reach me a gentian”, which communicates so powerfully the speaker’s helplessness, and the wish:

... give me a torch!
 let me guide myself with the blue, forked torch of this flower
 down the darker and darker stairs ...

A wish in which his mythologising imagination transforms a known place and time, “soft September” becoming “frosted”: “even where Persephone goes, just now, from the frosted September / to the

sightless realm where darkness is awake upon the dark". Seferis's poem struggles with its imagination of an afterlife, choosing instead to inhabit the world of unresurrected memory:

And then I read of her death in the newspapers
of Antigone's marriage and the marriage of Antigone's daughter
without the steps coming to an end or my tobacco
which leaves on my lips the taste of a haunted ship
with a mermaid crucified to the wheel while she was still
beautiful.

He remains poised, half-in, half-out of the earth, where Lawrence crosses over. And Lawrence's underworld is both more seductive and more unmoored. His Persephone is

... a voice
or a darkness invisible enfolded in the deeper dark
of the arms Plutonic ...

The gentians, like language or a lover, still lead him on.

Lawrence's free, free-wheeling improvisations, his commitment to admitting instability and chancy riffs into his poems (witness that last-minute argument with Milton's "darkness visible") is sustained even in these last poems' open form. It is typical that this poem exists in two versions we do not have to choose between.

John McAuliffe is an Irish poet who has lived and worked in England since 2002. His books include *The Way In* (Gallery 2015), joint winner of the 2016 Michael Hartnett Award, and *Of All Places* (Gallery 2011), which was a PBS Recommendation. He co-directs the University of Manchester's Centre for New Writing, where he teaches poetry and co-edits *The Manchester Review*. He is Deputy Chair of the Irish Arts Council and chief poetry critic for *The Irish Times*. Website: <<http://www.gallerypress.com/authors/m-to-n/john-mcauliffe>>.

DERYN REES-JONES ON 'PIANO'*(Poems 108)*

According to Andrew Harrison's recent biography there was often a hankering for a piano in the Lawrence household – Harrison describes several points in Lawrence's life when he went to sometimes extreme lengths to find one, including a time when he and Frieda were living briefly in Italy before their marriage and the piano had to be brought to them by rowing boat.⁴

'Piano' is ostensibly as quiet as its title. Completed in 1918 when the Lawrences were living in the Midlands, it displays none of the risky, tireless, testing, vituperative linguistic brilliance of the bigger, noisier Lawrence poems, to which ordinarily I'd expect myself to be drawn. Nevertheless, the poem has lodged in my memory like a thorn since I first encountered it in my mid-twenties, having randomly selected it to read with undergraduates as a close reading exercise.

Despite the rather boxed appearance of the quatrains which rhyme aa / bb, the unkempt rhythms of the poem's individual lines arch against its much more tidy edges. I especially admire the way Lawrence uses a struggle with voice and form to underpin the struggle at the heart of the poem between innocence and sophistication, then and now. There is an awkwardness in the insistence of the voice that runs across the heavy endings of the lines as each rhyme creates a wrong pause. It is almost as if the voice of the poem rubs against the rhymes which are, in some ways, clumsy and unsurprising: me / see, strings / sings, song / belong, outside / guide, clamour / glamour, cast / past. Sound meets meaning and not always comfortably. Indeed in some ways this poem feels like it could have been written by Louis MacNeice. As the poet is taken back to his childhood sitting beneath the piano there's a shift in the first stanza from a description of the piano's

⁴ Andrew Harrison, *The Life of D. H. Lawrence* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), 113.

notes as “tingling” to a description of them in the second as “tinkling”. This change of letter feels itself like a musical shift from major to minor, from an experience rooted more in bodily excitement to a more gentle experience even as the memory is revived in language.

Perhaps I connect to the poem because it strikes to the essence of conversations I am currently having, both with myself and others, about the politics of lyric, and of lyricism and beauty. I’m interested in the ways in which repetitions – of words, closely-related words and rhymes – might echo throughout a poet’s oeuvre. I’ve recently been thinking about the way in which the American poet Elizabeth Bishop uses repetition in vowel sounds and homophones as a way of working through early trauma in her writing.

Does the poem fall into the trap of nostalgia? I’d prefer to frame it more through the Welsh word “hiraeth” which conjures up a much stronger sense of the poem’s melancholy, its loss being rooted not just in time but in terms of place. The sense of homesickness in this poem here is for song, even for a prelinguistic universe, for the music of the piano without words. And of course this loss is gendered. The loss of song is also the loss of the mother, and a very Lawrentian surrender of his masculinity to the maternal.

Deryn Rees-Jones is Professor of Poetry at the University of Liverpool. Her *Selected Poems: What It’s Like to Be Alive* is published by Seren (2016). Website:<www.derynrees-jones.co.uk>.