

Benjamin Bouche (University of Paris X) – Distance and Proximity to ‘Creatures’ in ‘Fish’

(The video of the presentation can be found here: <https://youtu.be/syXeRV1XAMU>)

The title of my PhD was: “*D. H. Lawrence and the Question of Thought*” (2020). My interest focuses on “poetic thinking”, or how a poem makes us think, but not in an argumentative or philosophical way. As a philosopher, or at least as a philosophy teacher, I like the way poetry can challenge philosophical ways of thinking, and therefore I try to take seriously this sentence of Lawrence: “*a real thought can only exist easily in verse*”. What should be thinking to make this formula true?

The question of “animal thinking” is very important in this respect, because animality has always been a challenge for philosophy. The French philosopher Jacques Derrida goes so far as saying that “*thinking concerning the animal [...], if there is such a thing, derives from poetry. There you have a thesis: It is what philosophy has, essentially, had to deprive itself of. It is the difference between philosophical knowledge and poetic thinking*” (p.7).

This is why I would like to focus on a poem on animality (what is sometimes called zoopoetics). This poem, written and added to a first draft of *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* in 1921, is “Fish”. I know that many things have already been said about this poem, I will refer to it later (Christopher Pollnitz and Jeff Wallace, who both spoke yesterday, have made important contribution in the question that I’m facing today).

I want to assert and defend two thesis about this poem, related to the general question of a “poetic thinking” on the one hand, and to the question of distance and proximity on the other hand. I will try to expose these two theses the most clearly that I could.

1. FIRST THESIS

It seems that we find in « Fish » an insistence on the *distance* between species. The narrator (or, say, the main poetic voice of the poem) is boating on the Seeler-lake (a lake in Austria, where Lawrence and Frieda arrived the 20th of July 1921). This “voice” (or to simplify, let us say Lawrence, as if we could identify the individual D. H. Lawrence and the “I” of the poem) wants to salute fish as kinds of friends, as if addressing the poem to them. In a second time, here is what appears at first, this salutation is cancelled by the consciousness of the illusion that sustain this proximity. Lines 108: *I left off hailing him. / I had made a mistake, I didn't know him.* [We know that Lawrence attributes this illusion of recognition – a kind of anthropomorphism – to St Francis of Assisi, who talked and preached to fish [peinture, même si surtout St Antoine de Padoue].]

A reader could conclude that this poem starts from a false proximity (an anthropomorphic illusion) to a fairer attitude, that seems close of the position philosophers call “mysterianism”: we can't know fish, or in Lawrence's words: “*Fish are beyond me*”.

A defender of this thesis is the American philosopher Thomas Nagel, who famously wrote in 1974 that human beings cannot know “what it is like to be a bat”. Interestingly, the chapter of *Birds, Beast and Flowers* where we find “Fish”, entitled “Creatures”, includes also two poems on bat and one on mosquito. The question of the possibility to know or to imagine what it is like to be such animals is different as what it is with big mammals, obviously closer to us, as it appears with dogs in a book like Donna Haraway's *When Species Meet* (2008). Could I understand or imagine what a dog is living? Maybe. But Nagel took the example of a bat, considering explicitly that it was less controversial (as he said, bat is for us between a dog and

a Martian). Could I put myself in the shoes of a mosquito, a bat or a fish? It seems easier to deny the possibility to imagine what it is like to be a Martian or a bacterium. These “creatures” then: mosquito, fish, bat: can we “understand” them, or establish a connection that help us to imagine what their lives are not only for us (as biology or ethology can do) but for them? Can Poetry help us in this matter?

In “Fish”, the poetic voice seems to switch between a faith in the possibility of imagining “what it is like to be a fish”, and the certitude that it is impossible, that the gulf cannot be overcome.

This vacillation is very common in philosophy, and the same can be said of two people of different class, culture, race, gender, or just two different human beings. There are times when the proximity comes to the fore, and other times where it is the distance.

But here it is not only a question of different times, and here is my first point: The interest of “Fish” comes from the duality of the truth it states. It is true that imagination is often a misunderstanding or an illusion. But it is also true that we can, especially by poetic language, imagine what other forms of life are like.

The poem “Fish” doesn’t see a succession of two affirmations, that would be: 1. we can imagine what it is like to be a fish. 2. It is an illusion; the reality is that we can’t imagine it. Distance is the truth, proximity the illusion.

Because we are facing a poetic thought and not an argument, we can’t identify this conclusion with the point of the poem. We find real poetic elements that help us to imagine what it is like to be a fish. I think of the different poetic inventions that make the reader see and feel the fish life across linguistic findings. These have been spotted and discussed by scholars (my French colleagues Elise Brault and Sarah Bouttier for example). To take a single example, at lines 16 to 19:

Your life a sluice of sensation along your sides, [with alliterations of /s/ and /f/ that gives the impression of the sliding movement in the water, or of the movement of the sea on the shore]

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; [I skip here just to show the stop, and the last verse, alone, hard to pronounce and harsh, to express the fixity or the fish eye (fish don’t have eyebrows)]:

Fixed water-eyes.

These are linguistic ways of expression, and not only descriptions or arguments.

Now in this poem, the “poetic truth” (what I just called the expressive-level), this “expressive-truth” contradicts the other truth, more reflexive, that says: all this is just an illusion, Fish are unattainable. I think it would be a mistake to go directly to the conclusion, forgetting the poetic start. There is a dream and the conscious of the dreamy quality of the dream. But this doesn’t invalidate the truth that can emerge in the dream.

We can try to resolve this contradiction, by saying: he (Lawrence, the poetic voice that say “I” In the poem) first thought and said that it was possible to imagine what it is like to be a Fish, then realized that it was impossible. But this is not true, and a close reading would demonstrate that things are less clear in the poem, the voice alternating from one point of view to the other. Poetry is precisely the medium in which conflicting perspectives can clash and coalesce at the same time, what would be impossible in an argumentative form. We’re

facing here the same problem as with Indians. As a knowledge it is a dream because scientifically it doesn't help, and it is even often wrong (Lawrence is wrong about the capacities of Fish to smell for example, and to communicate with each other, and, as with Indians, he creates a general category that is largely an illusion). Then what kind of "truth" are we facing in "Fish"? My answer is: a double truth, at two different levels: sensitively we can capture something of the life of a fish, and intellectually we can distrust the passage of this poetic truth into knowledge. The poem tells us something true of the life of a fish, but the moment we say: we know, we are mistaken. We must keep this distrust, this feeling of the irreducible distance between fish and humans. But this is only the intellectual conclusion, that does not invalidate the sensual or poetic truth that gives us something that could be named "truth".

2. SECOND THESIS

I come to my second point. The object of the poem is not only another species. What is aimed is also a certain kind of animality, a way of being alive that is also ours. As in *St Mawr*, written three years later, questioning the animality of the animal is a way to question the humanity, the animality of humanity. The concept of animal refers to everything that humans reject out of themselves. It has often been noted, Plato already, how vague this category of animal was, often used as a foil. All this is well-known. What I want to stress here is that animality refers to an evolutionary heritage that we carry within us, within our human bodies. I know that Lawrence has a more than problematic relationship to evolution, David Ellis made valuable and nuanced remarks about it (in D. H. Lawrence's Non-Fiction: Art, Thought and Genre, 1988). But it is not necessary to "believe" in evolution to pose a proximity between humans and non-humans. It is this proximity, this "animal in us" that the poem helps us to realize: Fish are painted as alien creatures, but also as "creatures", created as we are by the same creator.

From this point of view, two verses seem to me to be decisive. It is a commonplace of thought about the animal, from Plato to Derrida, that it is important to take into consideration the perspective of the animal on us. An animal should not only be an object to know, but also an agent that perceives us, and that can allow us to rediscover ourselves in its gaze. Derrida recounted the surprise of feeling observed naked by his cat. More recently, the French philosopher Baptiste Morizot pointed out how much the fact of being perceived as prey by some large animals, as meat to be consumed, implied in terms of redefinition of oneself. For the wolves, I am, among other things, a certain amount of meat, and this being-for-others allows me to reintegrate something excluded into my being-for-me. It is the encounter with the animal that allows me to pull myself together like meat, or like what-I-am-for-the-animal-that-I-meet.

In the poem, we find an awkward reference to "evolution" ([Fish] was born in front of my sunrise. / Before my day. // He outstarts me (in a traditional view of evolution, Fish don't "outstart" humans, but we can say, although, that Fish are closer from our common ancestor that what we are now)). Just after this, the poem switches to the vision of the fish, to let appear Lawrence (the "I" of the poem) as a killer:

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

The hand, symbol of humanity, appears especially horrible from the point of view of the fish, just as daylight does. Poetic imagination can help us to conquer a distant look, to get anthropocentrism undone, even if only for a short time.

But this distance relies on a strange proximity, and I would like to conclude on this point. Our human bodies are the living memory of a distant ancestor who once lived in the water. Our body is still made up of 60% of water, and salt water, water that we must regularly absorb to survive, and salt, because without salt we can't live. This dependence can be seen as a remnant of the lives of our marine ancestors. But we need the encounter with what we call an animal, and especially as alien as Fish, to realize this proximity. Here the conscience of an insurmountable distance leads us to realize the greatest proximity with other forms of life.

The poem said: I can and I can't imagine what it is like to be a fish. Let us now add: I am and I am not this fish, I am separated from it by an irreducible evolutionary thickness - whose difference in environment marks the radical character - but at the same time our common ancestor continues to exist in each of us, as an embedded memory, and our meeting can give rise to the reactivation of this common background. The encounter with a non-human otherness gives rise to the recognition of a distance between species, but also of a proximity, both as this form of life that I can always invest poetically, and as this biological life that I share in part because of the unity originating from all life on Earth.