

# **Dissolving the Anthropomorphic Shells: D. H. Lawrence's "Unfinished" Short Story "The Flying-Fish" and the Ecocritical Challenge**

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**(in *D. H. Lawrence Review* 46.1 &.2 (2021 [2025]), pp. 1-16)**

## **I**

### **A Blue Humanities Reading Strategy**

“Ecocriticism has of late begun to recognise in Lawrence a major figure, as was evident at the 2019 Paris Nanterre conference entitled ‘Lawrence and the Anticipation of the Ecocritical Turn,’” wrote Catherine Brown in the final chapter of *The Edinburgh Companion to D. H. Lawrence and the Arts* (438). In his chapter on “Politics and Art” in that book Howard J. Booth goes so far as to suggest that Lawrence “can be seen as anticipating a progressive green politics” (132). Both of these Lawrence scholars are contributors to the forthcoming book *Reading D. H. Lawrence in the Anthropocene* (forthcoming from Edinburgh University Press in 2025), which will extend what began in Lawrence studies as an interest in nature and has become a growing body of ecocritical work, briefly surveyed in the first chapter of my recent book *D. H. Lawrence, Ecofeminism and Nature* (14-16). This essay will make reference to two ecocritical concepts – Wendy Wheeler’s notion of “biosemiotics” (reading ecological signs) and Timothy Morton’s “mesh” (a more dynamic and multidimensional sense of the “web” of ecology). But perhaps an ecocritical reading of Lawrence’s story “The Flying-Fish,” one of the writer’s most vexingly enigmatic tales, should be framed within the new focus upon the “Blue Humanities.”

Amongst a tsunami of recent works on this theme perhaps most useful in framing Lawrence’s story is Serpil Oppermann’s *Blue Humanities* (2023) in that it not only encourages the highlighting of a number of features of the story, but identifies an approach to reading the text that challenges its “unfinished” status. “The Flying-Fish” is structured in three parts, the first of which is located on land, specifically the land of Mexico (colonised by the Spanish and now, Lawrence insists, by American culture), from which Gethin Day is called home to England. What Oppermann calls the “oceanic turn” in ecocriticism would focus interest on the contrast between the culture of the land and that of the two oceans of Day’s journey that follow, but also on the contrasting qualities of, in

Lawrence's naming of them, "The Gulf" in which the flying-fish appear in the second part and the dour "The Atlantic" in the third part (3). The Blue Humanities is concerned with, as Oppermann explains, "subverting the dominant assumptions about the seas," especially "the role of global capitalism" in exploiting its resources, as it also exploits human beings (3). In this story Lawrence's critique of the nihilism induced by Spanish colonialism and of the dominance of "mealy-mouthed Mammon" in driving Western human culture in Mexico and beyond is contrasted with the qualities of life in the ocean's inhabitants (*SM* 217). Most significantly, however, the reading strategy of the Blue Humanities approach seeks, to quote Oppermann again, to "dissolve our anthropocentric shells" (8). Oppermann offers a "material ecocritical 'poetics of water' as a better alternative to the anthropocentric paradigm, which views eloquence only in human terms" (13). The material eloquence of Lawrence's flying-fish and porpoises is at the climactic centre of this story, displacing a need for an extended anthropocentric ending and, I argue, demonstrating that the story is artistically, and certainly from a Blue Humanities perspective, complete rather than "unfinished", as it has always been presented by editors.

## II

### "The Sound of the Greater Day"

More than a narrative motif, but part of the sonic materiality and ecological relationality of this story is what Lawrence characterises as "the sound of the Greater Day" (*SM* 214). "The Flying-Fish" is a story that turns upon a brief moment of the sound of a voice in which is heard "the sound of the Greater Day." It is also a story in which the materiality of sound features strongly in each of its three stages. Most crucially, a succession of friends, editors and critics have heard, in the ending of Lawrence's story, a need for more - a need so strong that it has been definitively labelled "Unfinished," as, indeed, it is categorised in the Cambridge edition of *St Mawr and Other Stories* (1983) edited by Brian Finney who also refers to the story as a "fragment" (*SM* xxxvi). It is the argument of this essay that Lawrence knew that artistically the story was complete, clearly resisted adding to it, and created, in its final sentence, an ironic and final ending that needed no additional material.

It is unusual to be reading a story by Lawrence which was *created* by sound – the sound of the writer's voice as he dictated it to his wife whilst in bed as a result of a doctor's diagnosis giving him perhaps only a year more to live.

His tuberculosis was identified by a doctor in Mexico City on 11 March 1925 with the instruction that Lawrence must not write or paint “or anything.” Either on that day, or very soon afterwards, Frieda began taking the dictation of the story “The Flying-Fish,” the first and only time that this happened. So, in the manuscript of forty pages, now at the University of Nottingham,<sup>1</sup> the first nine pages are in Frieda’s hand. It only took eight days of apparently not writing for Lawrence to take up his pen to resume his correspondence, so it may be at this point that he took over the writing of the story himself, suggests Brian Finney. Lawrence’s hand clearly begins writing at the foot of page nine of the manuscript. In reading the story now from the Cambridge edition’s base text in the typescript prepared for its first publication in the posthumous *Phoenix* (1936), it is hard to distinguish the dictated voice from the written voice of the author. Indeed, the manuscript flows with few corrections, with the only exceptions being some word changes on pages 15, 20-21 and 32, which suggests that Lawrence did read back over his writing and could have added to its ending if he had been minded to do so.

The critical reception of the story has been decidedly dismissive, influenced, no doubt, by the designation “unfinished.” In the first book to be published on Lawrence’s short fiction Kingsley Widmer’s *The Art of Perversity: D. H. Lawrence’s Shorter Fiction* (1983), Widmer dismissed the tale as a “fragment” (206). In the second work devoted to Lawrence short stories, Janice Hubbard Harris’s *The Short Fiction of D. H. Lawrence* (1984), Harris mistakenly referred to “The Flying Fish” as “the fragment of a novel” and considered that the contrasting “days [...] tend towards preciousness and exclusivity” (240). Despite discussing twenty-seven of Lawrence’s stories in *The Cambridge History of the Short Story*, Dominic Head ignored it altogether. Such opprobrium has continued into more recent times. In his *D. H. Lawrence and Attachment* (2022), Ronald Granofsky rated “The Flying-Fish” as “relatively insignificant in the body of Lawrence’s work” (161). The Cambridge edition consigned the story to an appendix in *St Mawr and Other Stories* (1983), probably because it is designated “unfinished.” I want to argue that the story is finished and that the only evidence for the designation “unfinished” is the unreliable memoir of Lawrence’s Buddhist painter friends, travelling

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<sup>1</sup> Not lost as the Cambridge edition inevitably had to conclude, the manuscript not becoming available for another twenty years: all the Cambridge editor could do was rely on sightings by both Powell in 1937 and Tedlock in 1948 (*SM* xxxiv). I am grateful to Jonathan Long for drawing my attention to this manuscript which is now published in Duan 2024.

companions and latterly neighbours, Earl and Achsah Brewster (1934).<sup>2</sup> The label “unfinished” has been used by editors ever since, even by Keith Sagar who admired the story, including it in his Penguin collection *The Princess and Other Stories* (1971). Sagar, like the Brewsters, wants the story to have a different ending that, I shall argue, was anthropocentric, rather than accept the biocentric point of the story which a Blue Humanities reading highlights.

In this story Gethin Day is in a “lost town of South Mexico” (*SM* 207) when he receives a cablegram from his dying sister calling him home to the family Elizabethan house in Derbyshire, Daybrook House, that he is about to inherit. He recalls *The Book of Days*, written by his Elizabethan ancestor who built the house, which has become “a sort of secret family bible,” parts of which Day knows by heart (*SM* 209). Ross Parmenter regards *The Book of Days* as “the impressive invention” of this story: “It helps the hero understand not only the impact of Mexico itself but his experience of death in Mexico,” that is to say, the latent vitality that Lawrence believed to be disguised by a death-oriented culture (332). Lawrence’s intention for this to resonate beyond Mexico is indicated by the symbolic discourse of *The Book of Days* to which he apologetically draws attention in explaining Gethin Day’s tastes: “In a dilettante fashion, he had always liked rather highflown poetry” (*SM* 209). This taste for the portentous and symbolic, heightened, Lawrence suggests, by the fever of the malaria that Day suffers – “the poison that lurks in all tropical air” – invites the reader’s indulgence for the “rather highflown” tendency of Day’s thoughts in this story which centre upon a contrast between “the common day” of the everyday conduct of human civilisation and the notion of “the Greater Day” originating from *The Book of Days* (*SM* 211):

Beauteous is the day of the yellow sun which is the common day of men; but even as the winds roll unceasing above the trees of the world, so doeth that Greater Day, which is the Uncommon Day, roll over the unclipt bushes of our little daytime. (*SM* 209)

The archaic grammar and language is obviously being enjoyed by the writer of the “highflown” pastiche here. In the Mexicans around him Day sees both “men of a dying race, to whom the busy sphere of the common day is a cracked and leaking shell” and the contrasting potential in “handsome, wide-eyed men left

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<sup>2</sup> They seem to have been rather unfairly parodied in the story of this period, “Things” – unfairly because the differences between the Brewsters and the story’s Melvilles outweigh the similarities. Significantly, however, America had been to the Buddhist Melvilles “the Sodom and Gomorrah of industrial materialism” (*VG* 84).

over from before the flood in Mexico” (*SM* 209). “In the faint permanent delirium of his malaria,” Day sees the Mexican obsession with death – ““Beautiful it is to be dead!”” – as “the despair that comes when the lesser day hems in the greater” and a symptom of a process of “dying back” to a life in the Greater Day through the death of “the lesser day” (*SM* 211)

The notion of “dying back” is not available to Day himself. Lawrence makes it clear that white Western intrusions into Mexico, from the Spanish to the later Americans, have been responsible for the diminishment to nihilism of Mexican life in the common day. But Day believes that by leaving Mexico and returning to England - even “small and tight and over-furnished” England - he now “dare face the sun behind the sun, and come into his own in the Greater Day” (*SM* 210). The phrase “come into his own” echoes an insight of his sister’s: that Day’s wanderings about the world had at their root his inability to know how to “come into his own” at home in Daybrook House, the home also of *The Book of Days*. The challenge now for Gethin Day is to see through the cracks in his everyday world to “the sun behind the sun.” But such moments come to him not only as sights – insights - but also as sounds. At a station on his train journey away from Mexico City an Indian, “a native, a big handsome man,” evidently of the Indigenous Tlaxcala tribe, offers to sell Day an ice-cream:

“Quiere helados, Señor?” said the Indian, reaching a glass with his dark, subtle-skinned, workless hand. And in the soft, secret tones of his voice, Gethin Day heard the sound of the Greater Day. (*SM* 214)

This is a trivial moment, if there can be such a thing in a Lawrence story.<sup>3</sup> The character buys an ice-cream with a ““Gracias.”” Can it carry the weight Lawrence wants it to hold? The voice of this Indigenous man, from a named ancient culture, is the voice of the past in the present at a train station. It is the voice of a humbled culture, but vibrant with connection to “the sun behind the sun.” It is a voice engaged in an everyday commercial transaction that carries deep echoes of a complex and ultimately unfathomable knowledge. Finally it is a masculine acoustic from “a native, a big handsome man” addressing an

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<sup>3</sup> Achsah Brewster has an interesting observation in introducing her reminiscences, writing that, “Many of the incidents are trivial, but Lawrence had the power of linking paltry occurrences with enduring reality. He had a way of transmuting the dull stuff of life into cloth-of-gold, he could lead from a blade of grass to the Brahma world” (237). Or in this case, from an ice-cream seller’s voice to the sound of the Greater Day.

emasculated white man whose sister has perceived that he does not know how to come into himself (*SM* 214).

It is worth pausing to ask what Lawrence meant to signify by the naming of Tlaxcala culture and how he came to learn of it. Neil Roberts notes that Lawrence had read W. H. Prescott's book *History of the Conquest of Mexico, with a Preliminary View of the Ancient Mexican Civilization and Life of the Conqueror Hendando Cortés* in one of its many editions, citing the London edition of 1886 (182, n. 33 and 22). Prescott emphasises the fierce independence of the Tlaxcalans, who, having held out against domination by the Aztecs, supported Cortés in his vanquishing them. Prescott referred to Tlaxcalans as people "whom the sight of an Aztec seemed to inflame almost to madness" (7). Indeed, Cortés' dependence upon this Indigenous warrior tribe is indicated by the fact that his attack on the first city of Iztapalapan consisted of "two hundred Spanish foot, eighteen horse, and between three and four thousand Tlaxcalans" (6-7). The cunning of the Tlaxcalans in using the Spanish for their own political ends indicates the strength of their will to endure, as modern historians, such as Brian Hamnett, recognise: "The manner in which the Indian states had brought the Spanish into their own political conflicts meant that the latter would have to learn to survive in a vast territory that remained overwhelmingly native American in character" (63). Addressing the question of Lawrence's attitude towards the Tlaxcalans, Neil Roberts notes that "I imagine that [Lawrence] admired the Tlaxclans for their resistance to the Aztecs, though the outcome of this, the virtual destruction of all indigenous culture as a result of their alliance with the Spaniards, is hardly to be celebrated."<sup>4</sup> Despite diseases brought by the Spanish that decimated the Indigenous population, this voice of a Tlaxcalan in the story is the voice of a survivor that apparently carries the potential for a revival of the Greater Day within a death-obsessed Mexico.

Paradoxically it is a living voice that speaks out of the silence of the deracinated land of death through which Day's train had been passing:

The country was wild, but more populous. An occasional hacienda with sugar mills stood back among the hills. But it was silent. Spain had spent the energy of her little day here, now the silence, the terror of the Greater Day, mysterious with death, was filling in again. (*SM* 214)

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<sup>4</sup> Email to the author, 12 June 2024.

That short, quiet sentence – “But it was silent” - has a powerful effect. It is a silence that signals the end of a civilisation, but it is also the potent silence of renewal at work, “filling in again.” Renewal only comes through the mystery of the death process, which is not an end, but a cycle; after that silencing sentence there tumbles an accumulation of phrases driving towards the “again” of the cycle of cultural renovation.

One cannot but see this story as a response to the declaration of Lawrence’s own death process. He had written to Brett the day after Frieda had written to tell her about his tuberculosis, “You hear how my flu remains got tangled up with *malaria*” (5L 210). *Malaria* is underlined in an act of denial. Gethin Day is not Lawrence, but his thoughts and feelings, about Mexico and England, about the ordinary day and the Greater Day, about the processes around him of which he is a part, are the projections of Lawrence’s imagination at this significant point in his life when his personal death had to be confronted. Yet the death process in this story is cultural and the renewal is personal. As John Worthen has pointed out, “the part dictated to Frieda was haunted by a vivid distaste for the “lost depths of Mexico” and an intense nostalgia for the English Midlands” (322-3). That “distaste” is “vivid” because Lawrence communicates it with the sudden sound of a crack as Day realises that the everyday world around him in Mexico represents a cultural death process:

But in the last years, something in the hard, fierce finite sun of Mexico, in the dry terrible land, and in the black staring eyes of the suspicious natives had made the ordinary day lose its reality to him. it had cracked like some great bubble, and to his unease and terror, he had seemed to see through the fissures the deeper blue of that other Greater Day where moved the other sun shaking its dark blue wings. (SM 2009)

“Unease and terror” are created here by the only partial vision through the cracks of a mysterious “other sun” that has a strange agency: it acts with two verbs, “moved” and “shaking” in a sky that becomes its blue wings.

From the open door of his sick room Day had heard the barefoot natives “flitting with silent rapidity” across the house patio, “mysteriously going nowhere.” His open window gave onto the street where natives passed and he heard “the soft, light rustle of their sandals” which represents “the silent swiftness of the Indian past,” in contrast with “the strange, endless, pullulating whimper” of a beggar sticking a hand through the grille (SM 210). These are the

mysterious sounds of a degraded culture in its death throes. Even the bells of the cathedral “sounded hollow” (*SM* 211). Noting the story’s evocation of a mythic England at a time when Lawrence became aware of his own serious illness, John Worthen writes that, “It is probably not a coincidence that the remaking of England as a heavily mythologised, rural world, to which Lawrence clearly had a profound attachment, came just when the sentence of his own mortality had been pronounced: ‘he felt that home was the place’” (323). But home for Gethin Day, whom Worthen quotes here, is very much defined by the words of the *Book of Days*. It is not so much a house in Derbyshire as an outdoor space, open to the natural sounds of the English countryside where men can “breath deep, and be breathless in the great air” (*SM* 212): The closed house with the family around the hearth is characterised by the *Book of Days* as typical of “little days”: “And the time will come at last when the walls of the little day shall fall, and what is left of the family of men shall find themselves outdoors in the Greater Day, houseless and abroad” (*SM* 212). Of course, the ultimate experience of the outdoors, “houseless and abroad” will be on the ocean.

On his journey by train to catch the boat across two oceans, first crossing to Cuba and then across the Atlantic to England, Day pays attention to the outdoors on view – the deer that knew they were safe, “the deer stood and wondered, away there in the Greater Day, in the manless space” (*SM* 213). Where there is a village he sees “Spain putting the bubbles of her little day among the blackish trees of the unconquerable” (*SM* 214). Eerily, Day is reading a copy of the *Book of Days* and comes upon a passage that mentions Vesuvius just as the train he is in passes a volcano “that looked back at him” with a challenge explained in the *Book*: “When earth inert lieth too heavy, then Vesuvius spitteth out fire. And if a nightingale would not sing, his song unsung in him would slay him” (*SM* 216). This latter expression especially encouraged critics, like Sagar, who read this story as Lawrence’s celebration of personal vitalism. But I want to argue that, as it stands, this story is rather a celebration of what the Blue Humanities would name ecological relationality.

### III.

#### **The Sound of the Mesh**

All of the foregoing prepares the reader for the exquisite descriptions of flying-fish and porpoises that exemplify the Greater Day, not only by being “outdoors,” but “abroad” in the medium of water. Of course, especially



outdoors, sound is only one part of the rich tapestry of signs and agencies in the ecology of the cosmos we inhabit and sensuously apprehend. What Wendy Wheeler calls the “biosemiotics” by which we read intuitively all the time the ecology we inhabit includes all the senses in reading the signs we live among.<sup>5</sup> The ecocritic Timothy Morton has suggested that we replace the conventional static image of an ecological “web” with a more than two dimensional and more dynamic notion that he calls “the mesh”<sup>6</sup> in which we constantly adjust to the other agencies in our environment, as do those agents – plants, weather, animals and land, for example – with each other. This notion of a dynamic “mesh” decentres the human, displaces the human at the heart of an anthropocentric web and gives a focus to the relational that is active, sensitive and responsive. I want to argue that it is anthropocentric editing to call “The Flying-Fish” “unfinished” because the real focus of this story is what Gethin Day learns from observing flying-fish and porpoises, as I hope to demonstrate.

Lawrence himself might, at one point, have contemplated the possibility of the story having an ending that focussed upon the human, apparently saying, in Achsah Brewster’s recollection and in response to the Brewsters’ persistent questioning, that, “The last part will be regenerate man, a real life in the Garden of Eden” (288). A consequence of this remembrance of Achsah Brewster has been that it has become usual to point out, as both Finney and Sagar have done, that Lawrence was saying this as he was revising *The Escaped Cock*, which does just what he contemplated, whilst deploying the phrases “the greater day” and “the little day.”<sup>7</sup> But what if Lawrence did not, could not, “finish” this story because he sensed that, in some profound way that perhaps he could not explain to the insistent Brewsters, it was already finished?

A closer look at Achsah Brewster’s account of her and her husband’s conversations about this story suggests that Lawrence strongly resisted adding to the story. One should note that this account is not entirely reliable. Achsah refers to the story as a “novel” (288). But Lawrence’s including it in a list of

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<sup>5</sup> See Wheeler 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Morton writes that “Each point of the mesh is both center and edge of a system of points, so there is no absolute center or edge” (29).

<sup>7</sup> Lawrence’s use of this mode of contrast in “The Escaped Cock” two years after “The Flying-Fish” has a rather different function. “It was the life of the little day, the life of little people. And the man who had died said to himself: Unless we encompass it in the greater day, and set the little life in the circle of the greater life, all is disaster” (VG 153). By now Lawrence was concerned less with critique and its alternative than with integration in the mission of the man who died. He also uses it in “Á Propos of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*”: “Let us prepare now for the death of our present ‘little’ life, and the re-emergence of a bigger life, in touch with the moving cosmos” (LCL 329).

potential story ideas indicates that he thought of it as a short story in a possible sequence featuring Gethin Day, the second of which was to be called “The Weather-Vane” (*SM* xxxiv). However, Achsah Brewster wrote, “The enduring beauty of ‘The Flying-Fish’ made us ask at various times if he had not finished it, to which he would reply, that we must not urge him to finish it” (288).<sup>8</sup> The “enduring beauty” of the story which so impressed the Brewsters is clearly the description of the vivid life of the sea creatures in the Gulf of Mexico in contrast with the lives of the human creatures at sea on the Atlantic in the final part of the three-part story. It is they who are the living dead, giving another sense to Lawrence’s apparent statement to the Brewsters that, “‘I’ve an intuition I shall not finish that novel. It was written so near the borderline of death, that I never have been able to carry it through, in the cold light of day’” (288).

These are actually the words of Achsah Brewster, of course. Is it possible that this account in the memoir of the Brewsters has introduced the idea that the story is unfinished, not only to the later editors of Lawrence’s work, but to Lawrence himself?<sup>9</sup> John Worthen, one of the General Editors of *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of D. H. Lawrence*, remains convinced that the story is unfinished, although he has suggested that Lawrence “presumably wrote at least the last part on the boat back to England, when he could (in theory) have managed to continue it to an ending - but clearly didn’t choose to, so far away from the initial experience.”<sup>10</sup> He was far away from the Mexican context of the first part of the story, but in the Atlantic he was at the centre of the context of the final part of the story. The point is that he chose not to add to it because, I would argue, that “in the cold light of day” the story is complete, concluding with the image, however unpalatably unregenerate, of human life lived “so near the borderline of death” in contrast with the flying-fish and porpoises. This is confirmed by Buxi Duan’s pointing out that in the *Pansies* notebook in which the story was written Lawrence then wrote on the next page the essay ‘Do Women Change’, leaving no space for any further additions to the story (Duan 2024: 155).

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<sup>8</sup> On 13 August 1929 Lawrence wrote defiantly to Earl Brewster, perhaps anticipating an enquiry about “finishing” the story, “‘The Flying-Fish’ remains where it was” (7L: 424).

<sup>9</sup> Just two months earlier, in a letter of 22 January 1925, Lawrence had written, “Do you think that books should be sort of toys, nicely built up of observations and sensations, all finished and complete? – I don’t. To me, even Synge, whom I admire very much indeed, is a bit too rounded off and, as it were, put on the shelf to be looked at. I can’t bear art that you can walk round and admire.” (5L 200-1).

<sup>10</sup> Email to the author, 29 April 2024.

Critics have struggled to understand the story's fundamental meaning. In his book on Lawrence's short stories, Widmer dismisses "the violent antipathy to humanity" in this story as "the usual Lawrence" (201). Keith Sagar wants the story to have a social, even a political meaning: "Lawrence was seeking some equivalent poise [to that of porpoises], harmony, first in an individual man, later in a society, a civilisation. Gethin Day was to have been such a man, perhaps with others" (1966: 209-10).<sup>11</sup> The extrapolation here from the poise of porpoises to a harmonious human civilisation needs to be challenged. But there is some justification for it in Lawrence's two critiques of commerce in the story. The first is in his characterisation of the port of Vera Cruz: "It was a point where the wild primeval Day of this continent met the busy white-man's day, and the two annulled one another. The result was a port of nullity, nihilism concrete and actual, calling itself the city of the True Cross" (*SM* 217). The second is his observation that second class boat passengers like Day, a man of "moderate income," are more circumspect with "money and its power":

For the lesser day of money and the mealy-mouthed Mammon is always ready for a victim, and a man who has glimpsed the Greater Day, and the inward sun, will not fall into the clutches of Mammon's mean day, if he can help it. (*SM* 217)

The force of this sentence lies in its pivoting about the "inward sun" to balance two contrasting attitudes to the repeated "Mammon." But these rather trite critiques of capitalist civilisation are not the point of the story. They are part of its preparatory structure of contrasts. The story is moving towards its gloriously positive, climactic perception of the Greater Day in the lives of the sea in the second part of the story titled "The Gulf." It is the flying-fish and porpoises in their lived ecology in the Gulf of Mexico that are the point: "No wonder Ocean was still mysterious" (*SM* 222). "Filled with facts and mysteries," writes Oppermann, "that is indeed what the sea is all about" (18).

Sagar performed a slight of hand when he wrote that "Lawrence's notes tell us that Gethin Day was to marry on his return ..." (1966: 207). Actually these are the notes for a different story titled "The Weather-Vane" with the same character. Under the title "The Flying-Fish" in these notes, transcribed by E. W.

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<sup>11</sup> Sagar felt that his wish was fulfilled in the story that he titled "A Dream of Life" ("Autobiographical Fragment" in the Cambridge edition of *Late Essays and Articles*) where he observed that "In a thousand years it seems men have at last reached the state of 'swift laughing togetherness' Gethin Day had marvelled at in the dolphins" (Sagar 1971: 11).

Tedlock, there is no plot summary. Finney suggests that this is perhaps because Lawrence was already at work on it. But it might equally be because it was finished, even if Lawrence spoke of it as abandoned for the time being. There is a significant difference for a writer between “unfinished” and “abandoned”, between that which definitely requires more work and that which is simply put aside because no more can be added. The point is that these readings and desires for the story are anthropocentric<sup>12</sup> and that an ecocentric reading of the story not only displaces this need for a human ending, but allows Lawrence’s sensuously spectacular ecological evocation of the “mesh” to be fully conveyed. Sagar quite rightly draws attention to the rhythm of the prose, but the ecstatic quality of this sea life is also created by the completely integrated evocation of the senses:<sup>13</sup>

Then suddenly the feint whispering crackle, and a cloud of silver on webs of pure, fluttering water was soaring low over the surface of the sea, at an angle from the ship, as if jetted away from the cut-water, soaring in a low arc, fluttering with the wild emphasis of grasshoppers or locusts suddenly burst out of the grass, in a wild rush to make away, and making it, away, away, then suddenly gone, like a lot of lights blown out in one breath. (SM 219-20)

In this sentence, which begins with a strange low sound, the flying-fish appear as a cloud, on webs of water. Is the first “fluttering” of water a sound and the second “fluttering” a visual image? We have fish “soaring” and then “bursting” like grasshoppers. The sentence is itself certainly a wild rush, ended abruptly with a single breath which is both sound and action. Gethin Day, curled on the bow-sprit, is displaced by this multi-sensory experience of wild life at home in sea and air: “The soul pauses and holds its breath, for wonder, wonder, which is the very breath of the soul” (SM 220).

If the flying-fish are able to be wildly relational with water and air, the porpoises are also relational with each other:

And still it was the same, the ship speeding, cutting the water, and the strong-bodied fish heading in perfect balance of speed underneath,

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<sup>12</sup> Keith Sagar’s reading of this story predates his interest in deep ecology that drove his later work such as *Literature and the Crime Against Nature* (London: Chaucer Press, 2005).

<sup>13</sup> By comparison the flying-fish and porpoises of *St Mawr* are superficially described, although still making the same point as this story: “The marvellous beauty and fascination of natural wild things! The horror of man’s unnatural life, his heaped-up civilisation!” (SM 129).

mingling among themselves in some strange single laughter of multiple consciousnesses, giving off the joy of life, sheer joy of life, togetherness in pure complete motion, many lusty-bodied fish enjoying one laugh of life, sheer togetherness, perfect as passion. (*SM* 221)

This laughter is surely the sound of the “mesh,” except that, of course, the “laughter” here is not heard, but apprehended by sight, in an integration of the senses. And its striking feature is that a “strange single laughter” can be created by “multiple consciousnesses” in “sheer togetherness.” The motion of multiple bodies apparently eclipses individuality, whilst at the same time including individuality to appear to be motionless in “a single laugh, yet each fish going his own gait” (*SM* 221). For Lawrence, this complex, communal laughter of the ocean is the sound of the Greater Day that is not found here in “dying back,” but in the living present. It is an evolutionary advance that is beyond human capacities in the present. Day thinks to himself: ““The life in the deep waters is ahead of us, it contains sheer togetherness and sheer joy. We have never got there -”” (*SM* 222). But is it possible in the future? Lawrence doubts it: “What civilization will bring us to such a pitch of swift laughing togetherness, as these fish have reached?” (*SM* 222). This is not just a matter of individual vitalism, as in “If men were as much men as lizards are lizards / they’d be worth looking at” (*Poems* 455). It is also more than a lizard’s attuned capacity to listen to “the sounding of the spheres” in the cosmos in the 1929 poem “Lizard” (*Poems* 455). It is a dynamic balancing of “each fish going his own gait” in “sheer togetherness and sheer joy” – what, in less joyous language, Blue Humanities scholars would call “a relational aqueous ontology” (Oppermann 10).

#### IV.

#### **“Man, with his tragedy”**

The third and final section of the story is titled “The Atlantic” and seems designed to dramatically contrast with the joy of “The Gulf.” The achievements of human civilisation in Havana are represented by rich Americans drunk in the gutters. They wear badges with their hotel details on so that they can be “carted home.” Day is depressed by the deadness of the concrete buildings and blames the Americans. “The Yankees owned it all” (*SM* 223). For the first time we hear the ship’s engines “going before breakfast time” to take Day and his fellow passengers out into a very different ocean: “The Atlantic was like a cemetery, an endless, infinite cemetery of greyness, where the bright lost world of Atlantis is

buried” (*SM* 224). A huge swell turns the ship into “a plague-ship, everybody disappeared, stewards and everybody” (*SM* 224). The sound of a futile mechanism dominates: “Up, up, up, heavingly up, til a pause. Ah! – then burr-rr-rr! As the screw came out of the water and shattered every nerve” (*SM* 224). The story ends: “On the third evening it began to rain, and the motion was subsiding. They were running out of the swell. But it was an experience to remember” (*SM* 225).

Lawrence’s irony in this last sentence lies not only in his reference to the human mechanical means of moving through the ocean compared with what he has just evoked in its animals, or human sickness juxtaposed with joyous ocean life, but in his questioning of what memorable experience humans do have to be measured by. There is an air of finality in this sentence; it has the effect of a fully resolved, unassailable assertion. This final sentence is surely the convincing evidence that Lawrence had finished this narrative. The poverty of human experience ironically evoked in this concluding line is all the more damning when one considers that two years later Lawrence visited the Etruscan tombs and celebrated another *past* culture in which humans might have come close to what he celebrates in the ocean in “The Flying Fish.” As Gethin Day reflected leaning over the bow-sprit:

No wonder Ocean was still mysterious, when such red hearts beat in it!  
 No wonder man, with his tragedy, was a pale and sickly thing in comparison! What civilisation will bring us to such a pitch of swift laughing togetherness, as these fish have reached? (*SM* 222)

The subtly evoked “pitch of swift laughing togetherness” in the ocean is the real challenge of the sound of the Greater Day. It is presented as an evolutionary challenge from ecological models in the present towards the future for human development. Such models evoked in this story do not need an anthropocentric resolution as apparently considered by Lawrence in saying, according to Achsah Brewster, “The last part will be regenerate man, a real life in the Garden of Eden.” In fact, the present structure of “The Flying-Fish,” taken as a whole, fits exactly the structure of a classic Lawrence novella such as *The Virgin and the Gypsy* (composed 1927, published in 1930) about which Lawrence wrote to Martin Secker, “I had a good whack at my gypsy story tonight, and nearly finished it: over the climax, and on the short down slope to the end” (*5L* 380). In the story the flying-fish and porpoises speak, in Lawrence’s amazing climactic prose, for themselves. Ship-board humans are merely the contrasting down

slope to the end, “so near the borderline of death.” So the whole shape of the narrative, rising to its climax at which sea-life challenges the “progress” of human evolution and descending to its final damning sentence, results in a complete and pointed short story that is artistically and morally finished, as all the evidence suggests Lawrence knew that it was. “The Flying-Fish” not only deserves more than to be dismissed as a “fragment” and should lose the marginalising appendix designation “Unfinished,” it should be understood for its bold, poetic exploration of themes—how one should confront one’s mortality, the impoverishment of human civilisation, how humans can be challenged by the non-human world, the empowerment of individuality in relationality--that preoccupied Lawrence throughout his lifetime and especially in the last years of his life.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> I am grateful for the development and support of the arguments in this essay from the participants in the 37<sup>th</sup> International D. H. Lawrence Conference, themed ‘Lawrence and the Sea’, in Nanterre, April 2024, especially Michael Bell, and to the participants at the 10<sup>th</sup> conference of the European Association for the Studies of Literature, Community and Environment titled ‘Sea More Blue’ at Perpignan, June 2024, especially Serpil Oppermann. The two anonymous readers of this paper have also made valuable contributions.

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