

Quiet Flows the Aire

Nigel Walsh

*The Aire is slow,
The Wharfe is lithe;
Where Aire takes one,
The Wharfe takes five.*
traditional ^[1]

Leeds has long had a slippery and shifting relationship with the elusive watercourse that runs through its heart, in whose waters David Oluwale met his death forty years ago in 1969 and which plays principle visual protagonist in Corinne Silva's new film 'Wandering Abroad'. If, as Patrick Nuttgens muses in his portrayal of Leeds as "the Back-to-Front, Inside-Out, Upside-Down-City", the city itself is hard to locate because of its sheer multiplicity of faces, then the same might be said of its river against which many of those faces, over the years have been set. Its new reputation as a place for the splendours of city centre habitation, much of which is based on lagoon-like living and shopping around locations where river and canal watercourses provide vistas and reflections, has grown steadily since the opening of the first riverside apartments in the late 1980s.

But if Leeds has put on this new face it's not always been like that. Through the years of the city centre's post-industrial decline, Leeds turned its back on the river, and it was difficult to even find, except in views from its bridges, and down dark, cloacal snickets and gunnels and shady dead-end street which ran down to the water's edge and down one of which David Oulwale was hounded into its dank waters. Even at the height of the city's industrial might, when the railway came to town, Leeds built its principal station, in a great feat of Victorian engineering, on top of the river, as much perhaps a symbolic act in which the new iron road set out to emasculate its predecessor the waterway, as a designed confluence of transport systems. When the so-called New Station opened in 1869, a mile-long connection, over bridges and viaducts, linked the former Leeds and Selby line with the LNWR, the station itself built partially on a bridge over the Aire. Through the belly of the beast tumbled the re-directed waters of the Aire, channelled through the Dark Arches a dark, mysterious, echoing chamber which quickly became one of Leeds's more mythical locations, a city of perpetual night in miniature.

Later, Caryl Phillips recalls a childhood in 1960s Leeds where 'nature' was accessed on school-boy walks along the canal towpath, the 'countryside' quickly revealed as a sham
"...I remember occasionally crossing the river Aire. My memories are of a dark and uninspiring stretch of water, with gloomy sheds and warehouses lining both banks" [2]

Returning after thirty years he notes the warehouses transformed into apartment blocks, boutique hotels; the water's edge fringed with bars, cafes and restaurants; walkways opened up along the banks to allow office staff a reach of the canal or river in their lunchtime, the towpaths a circuit for early morning runners and cyclists, the water itself, no longer polluted. Communities have grown up around the waterside, affluent sectors of the city centre, and, in line with the reclamation of other post-industrial northern cities, Leeds has its zones of leisure and pleasure.

But there is space too for the river still to reveal a darker heart. In his remarkable account [3] of a dispossessed under-class youth growing up on the margins of the city and housing estates on the east of Leeds, where most of the narrative unfolds, Bernard Hare elects to begin its action in the heart of the city, near the Royal Armouries

"Upstream by the railway station, the canal and the river join together and gently make their way through Leeds city centre as one. At the Royal Armouries, the two waterways divide once more into their separate courses. The water level drops a couple of meters, there are lock gates for canal traffic and a violent weir that accumulates flotsam and jetsam from the river."

As the narrative progresses this feels increasingly like an intrusion into the city centre by an alien life-force, and Hare seems to underline this by placing his eponymous anti-hero atop the sewage pipe that spills its contents into the river. Hare alludes to building development – and since the book's publication a vast marina, Clarence Dock, has opened up in the vicinity as a quite backwater. Urban, pursued by his ex officio social worker end up though in turbulent waters:

"It was like jumping into freezing black treacle. The cold numbed me to the bone and for a moment I thought I would pass out from the shock. I sank to the bottom like a brick. The mud sucked tenaciously at my feet and I performed a bizarre, slow-motion underwater dance. As I tore one foot loose, the other sank deeper into the slurry on the bottom. Just when I thought it was time to stop dancing, the river itself tore me loose from the quagmire and tossed me along like a discarded aluminium beer barrel".

Generally, from an early stage in the life of Leeds as an industrial city, depictions of the river have shown a tendency to play down its more turbulent aspects. Leeds might have its origins as a trading city in the fording of a mudding crossing of the Aire, but artists often chose to paint its more bucolic outer reaches. Around the time Henry Pether came to paint his moonlit idyll of the river, at Kirkstall, mid-19th century Leeds was a crucible of industry; ‘the impression of the whole is of a large and industrious town, whose smoke filled atmosphere is smiled upon by the heavens’ as one contemporary observer had it. ^[4]

In 1841, the population, at 152,000, had doubled in just twenty-five years. Stuff from Leeds’s mills was travelling all over the country and around the globe – Brazil, Russia, Canada, its exit route along the waterways. ‘Leeds would have appeared one of the most extraordinary phenomena of the age.’ (David Hill). Topographical views of Leeds by Joseph Rhodes, Alphonse Dousseau, Robert Butter, Thomas Burras, even, in 1816, JMW Turner’s ‘Leeds from Beeston Hill’, showed a city of perspiring chimneys, where, if the river appears at all, it is as a schematic topographical feature. London-based Pether, like his father, a specialist in moonlit views, depicts the tranquil reach of the Aire by Kirkstall ^[5] on a still night as if reaching back to an earlier Romanic era – there had been boating on the river here from the end of the 18th century – and, clearly, mid-19th century ‘there was even a market for nocturnal excursions’ (David Hill) . The Abbey ruins and the blasted trees dominate, but look closely and you can see a city sleeping on the distance and dark silhouettes of industry.

Move on another fifty years and, in the final year of his life, that other notable painter of moonlit scenes, John Atkinson Grimshaw paints, in 1893, a picture of the watercourse at Knostrup, looking back the other way from Pether, westwards, towards the sleeping city. Grimshaw, who lived nearby in his beloved Knostrup Hall from many years, even gives his painting a temporal location, including the words ‘Sunday Night’ in the title. He was on familiar territory. He’d painted the Aire previously. A bustling scene of ‘Leeds Bridge’ in 1880 (also in the collection of Leeds Museums & Galleries) with active warehouses, wharves and barges, and, in the previous year a more desolate view ‘Reflections on the Aire : On Strike’ (private collection). A grim stretch of the river by iron works at Hunslet, a solitary figure gazing into the water, underlining the double-meaning inherent in its title, and providing the social comment Grimshaw occasionally engaged with. His later painting, smaller in scale, of ‘Knostrup Cut’, is more elegiac in tone, its greenish-yellow light crepuscular and sluggish. The towpath is empty, the barges at rest, the etched cityscape in the background sleeps, awaiting the waking of the industrial beast at the dawning of a new day. Grimshaw manages to transform the polluted evening air into a light-filled study of colour harmony, Whistler-style, yet retains something too that locates it in industrial reality.

Corinne Silva employs images of the river and canal watercourses of Leeds in her film 'Wandering Abroad' to draw the viewer into an engagement with the way in which such watercourse can act as powerful metaphors; at times its presence is quietly mesmerising as it dances before our eyes. David Oluwale, if it needs pointing out, arrived by water as a stowaway, fetching up in Hull from his native West Africa, and his body was found in the outer reaches of the city's stretch of canal near Knostrup. In the film, the allusion to Oluwale's life and death is a constant through subtle allusion, the voices-over of its interlocutors, speak of their own experiences as immigrants or memories of Oluwale, and seem sometimes to emerge from the water.

When they do appear Gabriel Adams, Abiye Hector Gomez and Arthur France excerpt a quite though powerful presence in interiors that sit in uncomfortable opposition to the grey-washed tones of the waterway scenes. In classical mythology the waters of Lethe were thought to provide a means to cleanse the memories of those who embarked on new journeys into the after-life. One might have wished the same for David Oluwale on his final river journey down the Aire, at least that the might be allowed to forget the miseries of his life in its final moments. Corinne Silva, in 'Wandering Abroad' provides us with re-activated, present memories against the backdrop of the river, lest we forget.

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- [1] I'm indebted to Ian Duhig for pointing out this traditional rhyme about the different rivers' capacities for drownings; the quote from Patrick Nuttgens prefaces his poem 'Masque of Blankness' about the death of Oluwale.
- [2] Caryl Phillips 'Northern Soul', The Guardian, 22 October, 2005
- [3] Bernard Hare 'Urban Grimshaw and the Shed Crew', (Sceptre), 2005
- [4] Leeds in Maps,(booklet) 1989 p 13 quoted David Hill 'Turner and Leeds. Image of Industry', Northern Arts Publications, 2008
- [5] Previously attributed to Abraham Pether, Bryan Sitch proposes the son Henry (active 1828-1865), on the basis that the spire of St Stephen's (built 1829) can be seen in the distance.