

THE LOBSTER'S TALE

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What is the lobster's tune when he is boiled?

Thomas Lovell Beddoes





Although its etymology stretches back to the Old English *loppestre*, and beyond that to a corruption of the Latin *locusta*, both the form and the meaning of the word ‘lobster’ have remained remarkably steady throughout the centuries. Some words that have lived in the world for a similar length of time have spread and branched, occupying new habitats and discarding old. Look at the many uses of the word ‘husk’ if you want an example. The lobster, however, has remained the lobster, a singular term for a singular creature.

Asked to consider the lobster, many people might turn to gastronomy: thermidor, bisque, *homard à l’Américaine*. But the lobster I first think of is Thibault.

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. . . *One day I realise that*

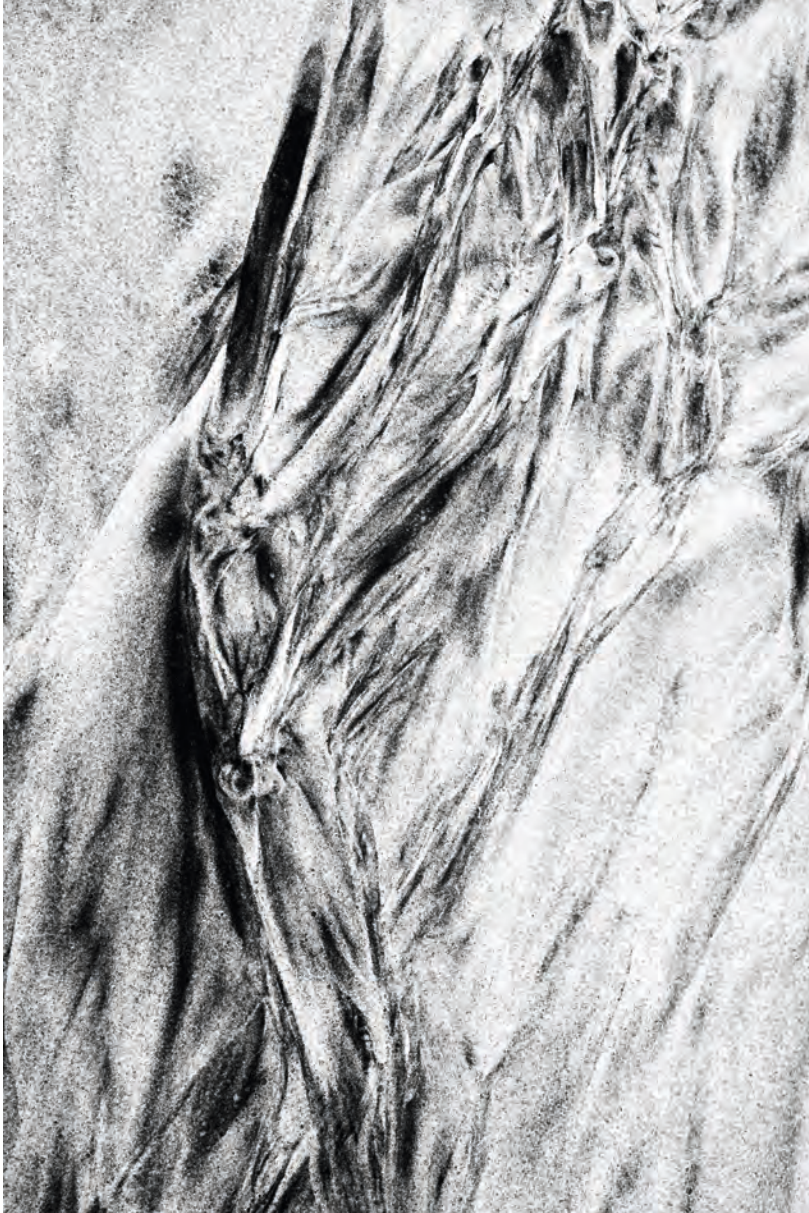
Thibault was a blue-black Breton lobster of the species *Homarus gammarus*. He was also a blue-blooded creature — the presence of copper in his blood made it so — and when he walked under the shady trees of the elegantly manicured Jardin du Palais-Royal, located just behind the Comédie-Française, he wore a blue silk ribbon. Rescued from the nets of La Rochelle, he had arrived in Paris as the domestic companion of a young translator and poet, member of a coterie of writers who would come to be known as the Petit Cénacle. Defending his choice of Thibault over the more usual pets, Gérard de Nerval asked, ‘Why should a lobster be any more ridiculous than a dog? Or a cat, or a gazelle, or a lion, or any other animal that one chooses to take for a walk?’

He singled out their quiet, unobtrusive qualities. ‘I have a liking for lobsters. They are peaceful, serious creatures. They know the secrets of the sea, they don’t bark, and they don’t gnaw upon one’s *monadic* privacy like dogs do. And Goethe had an aversion to dogs, and he wasn’t mad.’ Dogs, today, are *interdit* in the Jardin du Palais-Royal.



like the diving bell spider I can take my bubble with me and go walking in the world below the





waterline. Water has many mouths, and as I sink below the surface of what I want to say, bubbles

As zoologists know and poets may be only half aware, ‘the lobster’ is not an undivided entity. Under the carapace of that single word lies a branching Linnaean order. When David Foster Wallace considered the pain of the lobster in the title essay of his 2005 collection, he focused on *Homarus americanus*, another of the clawed lobsters that are the prototype for our cartoon images of creatures with eyes on stalks and outsized pincers. In England, Nerval is known primarily for his lobster, whereas in France the lobster has not occupied such a dominant position in the author’s mythology. On that side of the Channel, Thibault hides in a crevice, while in England he strolls about in plain view, almost obscuring his owner. As Wallace remarks, ‘there’s much more to know than most of us care about’.



rise from secret openings, air within meniscus, water balloons built to self-destruct. Let the messages

Some lobsters are nomadic, others migrate. Migrants adopt the methods by which the West was won. Walking or running across the open seafloor, and hence vulnerable to attack, they follow the leader in a long train, each lobster using its antennae to maintain contact with the one in front. The formation reduces drag and therefore requires less collective effort. The final lobster is the train's rear guard, delegated to do battle with any predator that might attack from behind. When threatened as a group, the lobsters circle their wagon-shells and turn outwards to defend themselves.



An English churchman who became a soldier was said to have 'boiled his lobster', changing colour from clerical blue to redcoat. Lobster-tail armour, used in the eighteenth century, was a flexible construction of overlapping metal plates. Rather than encasing the soldier in a rigid canister, it moved with the occupant. The lobster itself is even more flexible, moulting periodically to upsize its armour.



go, releasing underwatertalk in small explosions: here nothing is yet irreparably broken, and



silence is restorative. Below, old gods still navigate time-tested stories, while above, the gods of



speed and plenty whose turn it was to rule have lost the plot. I can't talk underwater, that's why it's



‘A profound thought is in a constant state of becoming; it adopts the experience of a life and assumes its shape,’ writes Albert Camus. An artist’s creative output ‘is strengthened in its successive and multiple aspects: his works. One after another they complement one another, correct or overtake one another, contradict one another, too.’ This thought appears in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus’ attempt to determine once and for all the correct response to Hamlet’s famous question in the face of the pointlessness and humiliations of human existence: is the better part of valour *to be, or not to be*, when after all *he himself might his quietus make / With a bare bodkin*? Or, in Camus’ own formulation, ‘Does the absurd dictate death?’

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so refreshing The darkness down here is larger by far than the world of breathable air or the



inner space of the skull. In the bathysphere I sit quite still, and through its fused quartz eye watch

King Sisyphus fostered both navigation and commerce. In one tradition, says Camus, he was wise and prudent, but in another he was ‘disposed to practice the profession of highwayman’ by plundering the ships that plied his waters. Zeus ordered Thanatos to chain up the robber king down in Tartarus, the lowest realm of the underworld — but Sisyphus the cunning turned the tables by imprisoning Thanatos instead, so that for a time no human being could be killed. (*Death, thou shalt die.*) The gods could not tolerate this, for it rather spoiled the fun of battle to leave no corpses.



A painted lobster is the second that comes to mind. The painter was Tupaia, the master sea artist (period term for a navigator) of Ra'iātea who guided Captain Cook on his 1769 expedition throughout the Pacific Islands, then travelled on with him to New Zealand and Australia. In New Zealand, Tupaia painted a triple portrait that shows a cloaked Māori figure handing a lobster over to a European in coat and hat. We can assume that, as an item of trade, the lobster was not given a pet name, but today we can identify it as one of the *Palinuridae*, the clawless family of spiny lobsters that play the violin.



the animated constellations of the deep go by: the anglerfish, the viperfish with flash of sabre teeth,

Palinurus, from whom this family takes its name, was Aeneas's pilot and, like Tupaia, an experienced navigator. But one night, as Aeneas and his Trojans were sailing towards Italy, Palinurus fell asleep at the wheel (*the darkness sur- / rounds us*) and tumbled overboard. He survived drowning to be washed ashore four days later, but was swiftly murdered by the brutish locals, who left him naked and unburied on the beach.



the silver hatchetfish, the barbel, and the squid looking back at me from behind its shining eyes



ringed with coloured lights, the elegant engineering of the flying snails, the pale-green photophores

All creation is ended by blind fate, says Camus. ‘If something brings creation to an end, it is not the victorious and illusory cry of the blinded artist: “I have said everything,” but the death of the creator which closes his experiences and the book of his genius.’



Instead of claws, Palinurids have very long antennae with thick, spiny bases that are sometimes used to club or pincer prey. Most family members have a flattened and ridged protuberance misleadingly called the ‘plectrum’ at the base of the antennae. Rather than functioning like a guitar pick, as the name suggests, the lobster’s plectrum serves as a kind of violin bow, producing sound by friction: when drawn across the ‘file’, a lump covered in microscopic scales or shingles near the lobster’s eye, it produces a loud, raspy buzz or squeak, which scientists believe is meant to warn off predators.



of lanternfish, the dragonfish whose passing I recognise by the twin row of lights on its side like



the windows of a submarine passenger jet. I try to hold my breath so as not to fog the glass. One



‘To be true,’ writes Camus, ‘a succession of works can be but a series of approximations of the same thought. But it is possible to conceive of another type of creator proceeding by juxtaposition. Their words may seem to be devoid of inter-relations, to a certain degree, they are contradictory. But viewed all together, they resume their natural groupings. From death, for instance, they derive their definitive significance.’ The lobster moults, and must hide while its new carapace hardens. During this period, however, it can still play the violin in self-defence. ‘But perhaps the great work of art has less importance in itself than in the ordeal it demands of a man and the opportunity it provides him of overcoming his phantoms and approaching a little closer to his naked reality.’ In the twenty-first century we can take objections to the artist’s gender as read, but perhaps this kind of heroism does have a peculiarly masculine cast.



gorgeous light big as a sixpence comes steadily towards me, then explodes in a hundred brilliant